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Youth, citizenship and online political communication

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Chapter 2

Democratic Citizenship and Political Communication

2.1 Introduction

Defined broadly as a fluid system where power and control lies with the people via elections, from its conception democracy has formed deep roots that today shape Western society. Athenian democracy was one of the first of such systems and its ideals are the basis for our notions of democratic rule and current governmental systems. Democracy is a term that may conjure up notions of elections, democratic representation, and an educated and empowered citizenship. Or it may relate more to free speech and individual liberties, with its norms sparking debate about what is expected or permissible in society. Despite but also because of these discrepancies, the concept of democracy is changing, and we are repeatedly faced with a reexamination of the traditional democratic values that surround our way of life, especially in a globalized world. This evolution points to a reconsideration of how we see democracy working. Do we want to create citizens who happily participate in existing political institutions, or do we encourage them to challenge the government and those in power? Do we think government should take the responsibility for problematic issues in society, or do we think that individual citizens can work towards change without bureaucratic support?

With questions like these, this chapter begins with a brief overview of how democratic theory has recently progressed. This is important in setting the stage for better understanding the evolution of democratic citizenship and political communication. The chapter addresses these issues and concludes by introducing a model that incorporates characteristics of conventional and non-conventional citizenship and strategic and reflexive modes of communication.

2.2 Evolving democracy

With the aim of providing a simple overview of a complex and enduring research field, democratic theory can be seen to evolve from pluralist to participatory and finally to deliberative democracy. This division is relevant as each theory builds on the last in terms of what entails citizen participation as well as the role of communication.

The pluralist model of democracy is also referred to as an elite-level competition, and “relies on an engaged and active citizenry that, fragmented into individuals, groups and parties

(political and otherwise), formulates and aggressively pursues private interests within a framework of collective legislative bargaining” (Barber, 1984, p. 143). Although engagement is important, within this tradition citizens generally are not afforded too much decision-making power or influence. Theorists often see the role of citizen participation as minimal, with communication inside a functioning democracy limited to a linear exchange from the state or political elites to citizens. Schumpeter (1943), who viewed democracy as a method rather than an ideal to strive for, perceived the emphasis on participation in classic democratic theory to be based on “empirically unrealistic foundations” and rather saw the vital feature as the struggle for the vote by aspiring representatives. Simply, democracy needs intelligent decision-makers, and citizens elect representatives who they believe will embody their interests. Schumpeter (1943) defined the democratic method as “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (p. 269). In this view citizen participation does not hold a central role in democracy, and participation primarily entails voting for leaders.

Others agree that this modest quantity of participation is adequate, if not necessary, for the proper functioning of democracy. Dahl (1956) demonstrated this view in his “polyarchy” model and sees participation as potentially cluttering the system; in fact, mass citizen participation could even lead to totalitarianism (Sartori, 1962). Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and MacPhee (1954) asserted, “certain requirements commonly assumed for the successful operation of democracy are not met by the behaviour of the ‘average citizen’” (p. 307). Thus, “limited participation and apathy have a positive function for the whole system by cushioning the shock of disagreement, adjustment, and change” (Pateman, 1970, p. 7).

Pluralist democracy places at its core the struggle between elites and the circulation of elites; it discourages extensive citizen participation, reserving the citizen’s role primarily for the voting booth. Mentioning Schumpeter and Dahl, Norris (2003a) noted that pluralist democracy is “preserved primarily through the elite-level competition and bargaining among the representatives of diverse interest groups, agencies, voluntary organizations, NGOs, and political parties representing all major sectors of society” (p. 4). Pluralist democracy does not facilitate the production of deliberation of the part of citizens, with a focus on private interests rather than the public good (Barber, 1984). Next, participatory democracy demonstrates the growing importance of citizen participation and communication with the state.

As mentioned, some argue that high levels of citizen participation may result in unrealistic expectations and may actually disturb the stability of the democratic system. However, participatory democracy theorists emphasize that citizen participation, and with it, an

acknowledgment of the importance of citizens communicating with the state, is a necessary and vital part of a healthy democratic system.

In her participatory theory of democracy, Pateman (1970) placed the concept of participation as central to her analysis. Drawing from arguments inherent in the works of Mill and Cole, she saw participatory democracy as “built round the central assertion that individuals and their institutions cannot be considered in isolation from one another.” The will of the people, at least the majority of the people, should be reflected in public affairs. Further, participation itself allows for the stability of the system, “through the educative impact of the participatory process” (pp. 42-43). Participation allows the democratic system to become self-sustaining, because participation leads to the increased ability to participate and thus allows a more active control over one’s identity and position as a citizen, resulting in a positive psychological effect on citizens. Further, it legitimizes political processes and decision-making.

Participatory democracy, through stressing the importance of citizen participation, promotes more active forms of citizenship. At the same time, there is a strong normative ideal of what constitutes good participation: Only specific actions are considered politically sound, such as voting, and should be prefaced within an understanding of how the political system operates. Thus, the citizen’s role is encouraged yet is kept within a rather strict sense of what can be considered proper in a democracy.

With a modern twist on participatory democracy, Barber (1984) saw strong democracy as being grounded in action, “something that is done by, not to, citizens.” He highlighted the importance of participation and stressed the need to create a “public capable of reasonable public deliberation and decision” (p. 117). In this model, Barber perceived citizens as able to make independent and worthwhile choices, at the same time highlighting the importance of conflict in such processes. Citizens must continuously talk to each other in order to create the political environment necessary for a strong democracy. Some take these notions further and argue for a more deliberative form of democracy.

Theorists of deliberative democracy call discussion among citizens “deliberation,” which includes rational critical participation without restraints, respect for other opinions, and an ability to demonstrate that self-interest is compatible with the common good (Dryzek, 2000; Habermas, 1989). Deliberative theorists argue that in order for more individuals to participate adequately in democracy, the normative conceptions of democracy must be open to revision, and such revision takes place through open channels of dialogue. Here, democracy also requires elite decision-making, but attaches great importance to deliberation on the part of citizens. As in participatory democracy, to properly function democracy needs a politically engaged public, but

citizens also should have more opportunities to become directly involved in the decision-making process.

Previously, theorists like Schumpeter (1943) argued that an apathetic majority is acceptable, even necessary for democracy to function. Within deliberative democracy, participation is essential and thus greatly expands the communicative role of citizens. It demands a new form of reflexivity from political elites. Those in positions of power have the ability – and, increasingly, the obligation – to hear and reflect on the voices of citizens.

2.3 The role of citizenship

Though fundamental differences exist in how democracy is defined, theorists generally hold the idea that membership in a democracy corresponds to citizenship, or the state of being a citizen. Citizenship can be defined as membership in or an attachment to a political community that carries with it both rights and responsibilities. As noted, citizens are sometimes seen as playing a minimal role in democracy, as individuals that hold rights and can claim justice for wrongdoing. I next discuss a traditional definition of what constitutes the state of being a citizen, including citizenship rights and responsibilities, before turning to more contemporary views.

Citizenship has not always been open to all people in democracies. Historically, many groups have been denied full status as citizens.¹ Theoretically, though, the concept of citizenship guarantees a number of rights (Marshall, 1950) as well as obligations, thus highlighting the idea of reciprocity. As a citizen, it is vital to both contribute to, but also benefit from, one's country (Oldfield, 1990).

Rights of citizenship

A classic explanation of citizenship rights by Marshall (1950) encompassed civil, political and social elements:

The civil element is composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom – liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice...By the political element I mean the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body...By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to

¹ Though rights increased with time, exclusion did not disappear but sometimes just became subtler. These groups, including women and ethnic minorities, were not allowed to vote and were not expected or encouraged to participate in public affairs (Mill, 1880; Schudson, 1998).

share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society (pp. 10-11).

In this view, civil rights are relevant to the personal freedom of the individual, and those concerning her or his legal or individual conduct, such as the right to peaceful protest. The political element primarily refers to a citizen's right to vote,² but also to run for office and become an elected representative. Social rights mean that every citizen is entitled to a minimum standard of living in society. If the individual maintenance of this standard is not possible, then citizens are eligible for welfare and other social services. Marshall saw citizenship as a guarantee that all people are treated as full and equal members of society. Using Britain as a starting point, he perceived these rights emerging in succession: Civil rights appeared in the eighteenth century followed by political rights in the nineteenth century, and social rights gained prominence in the twentieth century.

Some view citizenship more according to entitlements and do not mention obligations, and refer to it as "passive" or "private" citizenship (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994). Such a definition is relevant because some citizens, such as those in Britain and the United States, see themselves primarily as beneficiaries of these rights, rather than holders of certain responsibilities (Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991; King & Waldron, 1988).

Responsibilities of citizenship

Along with citizenship rights comes adherence to a variety of responsibilities. These include obeying laws, paying taxes or serving in the military, though here the focus is on knowledge and behavior related to political engagement and participation. Although strict adherence to these obligations is often not legally enforced, citizens may often find themselves facing disapproval in a cultural or societal sense (i.e., from friends and society at large); this often performs as "a more powerful incentive to act responsibly than punishment by an impersonal state" (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994, p. 363). Institutions like families, schools, and governments additionally perform an important function in the promotion and cultural enforcement of certain types of responsibilities.

In order to be well-informed, contributing members of a democratic society, citizens are expected to acquire certain types of knowledge. Some refer to this ability to understand the political as civic competence, "an understanding of how government functions, and the

² Citizens also have the right *not* to vote, at least in most democracies excluding those that have compulsory voting (e.g., Australia and Belgium). Voting is sometimes made compulsory perhaps due to the rationale that required participation will lead citizens to participate more fully in other areas.

acquisition of behaviors that allow citizens to participate in government and permit individuals to meet, discuss, and collaborate to promote their interests within a framework of democratic principles” (Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, & Silbereisen, 2002, p. 124). Although there is no agreement on the “proper” extent of participation, theorists do find some level of political knowledge necessary. For example, although Schumpeter (1943) did not see the citizen as holding a central role in democracy, she was expected to vote and engage in rational political discussion. Mill (1880) was less strict in his conceptualization of knowledge but agreed that it is necessary for participation. Others observed knowledge as important in facilitating continuing participation: “Political knowledge and interest in public affairs are critical preconditions for more active forms of involvement. If you don’t know the rules of the game and the players and don’t care about the outcome, you’re unlikely to try playing yourself” (Putnam, 2000, p. 35). By increasing one’s knowledge of political matters and participating (e.g., in one’s community), a citizen will increase her understanding and ability to participate and will want to participate more. Putnam’s “active forms of involvement” include improving one’s level of knowledge and interest and are often seen in relation to civic and political engagement.

Engagement and participation are interrelated but also distinct responsibilities of citizenship. Engagement can be seen as a kind of involvement in or enthusiasm towards a certain entity or objective. Participation is often manifested in a behavioral form (e.g., voting, communicating, or protesting) and may result from a state of engagement. Thus, engagement is a necessary but not sufficient condition for civic or political participation. Both engagement and participation refer to an active form of commitment to the democratic process, usually encompassing political matters such as involvement with political parties or running for public office and voting. There are certain normative assumptions that surround many of these activities. Civic participation, in contrast to political participation, usually encompasses a broader, less political range of activities such as involvement in civic organizations, volunteering or becoming involved in one’s community. For example, some have found that most citizens who participate in volunteer work do not consider their actions to be political (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002).

Another study lumped civic and political engagement together and saw their combined influence as a way of building social capital:³ “Whereas physical capital refers to physical

³ Putnam distinguishes between bridging and bonding social capital: Bonding social capital looks inwards and reinforces homogenous identities, such as in church groups or country clubs, and bridging looks outwards and include diverse individuals, such as youth service groups, or mass organization of citizens

objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Types of engagement and participation vary across democratic contexts. For example, US citizens, more than their European counterparts, have a tradition of joining groups or helping with political campaigns (Kaase & Marsh, 1979). Tocqueville’s classic “Democracy in America” found a strong ability to form civic associations to be a defining form of American democracy. Institutional actors play an important role in teaching citizenship and encourage, in various ways, a capacity for participation. The role of these actors is discussed next.

2.4 Institutional actors’ communicative role in democratic society

Institutional actors strive in various ways to enhance the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of citizens within democratic society. As this section shows, the evolving communicative role of these actors helps to distinguish a conventional view of citizenship from a non-conventional view, as well as setting the stage for understanding strategic and reflexive communication strategies within these contexts.

Socialization is important for a citizen to develop an understanding of her role within democratic society. This socialization must take place within various spheres of her life in order to develop the skills necessary for participation (Pateman, 1970). There are various official bodies that teach, encourage and facilitate citizenship. Key institutions include the government and, in the case of young people, its role in the education system. Political actors such as political parties, interest groups and social movements also contribute to establishing and nurturing these ideas, and the media provide a means for communication for other actors as well as relaying its own agenda.

Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) stressed that interaction between these institutions is crucial to understand the nature of political communication and has been the starting point for a great deal of academic study. At the same time these institutions are seeing a shift in influence due to growing cynicism and lack of trust on the part of citizens. For example, in focusing on the US case, Patterson (2002) pointed to institutional changes in the electoral system, political parties, the news media (a fondness for negative coverage), and the conduct (the staged nature and ever-increasing length) of election campaigns as reasons for such a decline in civic and

to protest various war efforts. Whatever the outcome, engagement is seen to have a positive effect on democracy.

political participation. Opinions vary as to how much influence these changes within institutions have had on evolving citizenship practices.

Government

Democratic governments are responsible for official recognition of the citizen, known as the concept of citizen-as-legal-status, or full membership in a political community (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994). The government mandates responsibilities such as paying taxes or serving in the military and works as a service provider, such as in the arenas of health benefits, and safety. As government plays a central role in carrying out the functions of democratic society, it is widely argued that it is in its best interest to communicate a transparent understanding of its policies and function (Norris, 2003a). Such transparency should in effect lead to a greater legitimacy of government in the eyes of citizens.

Due to a perceived increase in political apathy particularly among youth, recent theory has focused on government's task in recapturing public interest in democracy. Governments are seeing a growing lack of trust from their citizens, and with this, a swell in political cynicism. In recent years, governments have attempted to combat this backlash from citizens in a number of ways, for example by demonstrating transparency (Shenk, 1997). One way this is accomplished is by providing more online services (e.g., e-government), where citizens can access relevant information online and find and utilize government facilities on both a national and local level (Norris, 2003b). Particularly in the UK, government-sponsored institutions increasingly receive funding to reach members of the public by creating innovative sources to involve citizens more in the democratic process. These efforts aim to demonstrate a reflexive way of communicating with citizens: both on- and offline, governments attempt to be more open to citizen input (Coleman, 2004a). Such strategies have been particularly aimed at young people, and this is exemplified in later chapters.

The UK government also oversees the implementation of citizenship education in the school system. Schools teach students the workings of democratic society and how to participate in public discourse, and children "must learn not just to behave in accordance with authority but to think critically about authority if they are to live up to the democratic ideal of sharing political sovereignty as citizens" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 51). The educational system has long been connected with the conceptualization of citizenship (Marshall, 1950), but in the UK, citizenship education has just recently been implemented as a tool that builds on young people's knowledge and understanding the importance of, and their relevance in, the civic and political process. In September 2002, a national school curriculum began in British secondary schools (ages 11 to

16).⁴ Specifically, the program focuses on social and moral responsibility, community involvement, and political literacy, and emphasizes that the desired outcome should lead to active and responsible participation (Kerr, 2000). Until now, a traditional system of teaching citizenship was not present in England, but a growing concern with young people's lack of interest in civic and political matters contributed to this renewed interest (Kerr, 2003).

Because of its relatively new role in the British school system, the long-term effect of citizenship education is unclear. However, research has shown that formal education can make a difference. Keeter, et al. (2002) said, "Young people...respond to school-based initiatives, at least in the short run, as well as to other invitations to involvement" (p. 6). Formal education systems sometimes also work with other institutional actors to legitimize civic lessons.

Political actors

Within modern democracy, various political institutions exist to influence the government, either formally through representation, or more informally, through interest-based groups. The reason for the concern of political parties and interest groups over who votes for whom is clear: Who gets what, when, how (Lasswell, 1936) is determined by which groups are placed in power. In a number of democratic contexts including the UK, affiliation with a political party is necessary in order to run for office. Political parties usually vary in ideology and present distinct views on certain issues and topics of concern. Members of political parties control power for the public through representation and mobilize and recruit like-minded citizens. Because of this, political parties are quite concerned with linking to citizens in order to get their vote. In the process, parties (theoretically, anyway) provide political knowledge for citizens in helping them make an informed electoral choice. At the same time, political parties are seeing a vast decline in membership. Clarke and Steward (1998) found that according to citizens, the importance of political parties has declined over the past 40 years in Canada, the UK and the US. Schudson (1998) argued that political parties "are weaker than ever. They command strong party loyalties from fewer and fewer people, and they mobilize fewer people in active political campaigns" (p. 274). Political parties react to growing disinterest and cynicism from citizens, and try to compensate in numerous ways. Technology plays a key role in how politicians try to reach out to their constituents online and appear more genuine and in-touch with the concerns of the people. Some parties form youth branches that focus on the issues most important to this age group.

⁴ The citizenship curriculum is compulsory in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. It is not required in Scotland but most schools participate on a voluntary basis.

Political organizations such as interest groups and social movements appeal to citizens for similar reasons, though goals are often more focused on a particular issue. Some of these organizations are tied to political parties in achieving votes for a certain piece of legislation. Such groups including social movements play a key role in encourage participation, though sometimes within the realm of non-conventional citizenship, as will be shown later.

Media

The mass media are known as the watchdog of government, and contribute to informing citizens, determining what stories are chosen for publication or broadcast, and are regarded as a platform for discussion. The mass media are important to acknowledge because they capture a great deal of attention from citizens, whether for education or entertainment. The media do provide a source of political knowledge for citizens, but sometimes the government also compels this information. For example, public broadcasting has obligations in certain countries (Jakubowicz, 2003). Others view the media as undermining democracy. Corner and Pels (2003) contrasted their more positive view of the media with what they claim is a much better known “disabling” perspective: “[Media] perform their subversive function through such routes as the substitution of entertainment for knowledge, the closing off of true diversity, the pursuit of an agenda determined primarily by market factors and their susceptibility to control by government and corporate agencies” (p. 4). At the same time and particularly in the US context, media are decreasing in coverage of policy issues. This is partly because such a focus requires expensive production methods, but is also due to the fact that the media are increasingly viewing audiences as consumers, who prefer to be entertained, rather than citizens, who wish to be informed about civic and political matters (Bennett & Entman, 2001).

Media malaise theory argues that negativity in the media is responsible for citizens’ declining trust in political institutions and growing political cynicism. Mass media use has been linked to negative influences on the civic life of individuals, such as the “mean world” effect (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). Media have been accused of promoting a portrayal of “horserace” elections fraught with negative campaigning. Though many do blame the media for a decline in democracy, others have argued that the media can be favorable to the maintenance of political citizenship. Research has shown that exposure to political media content encourages civic engagement as well as political competence (Newton, 1999; Norris, 2003c). Brants (1998) developed an “infotainment scale” and found that although television programs did incorporate entertainment elements into informative programming, such a trend did not lead to a loss of traditional standards. Buckingham (2000) looked at the role the news

media play in informing and encouraging young people to participate as citizens. Others have argued that aspects of citizenship were even present in fan communities of programs like Big Brother and Pop Idol (van Zoonen, 2004).

Just as other political institutions have changed, the media have evolved from the concept of mass (i.e., designed to reach many, anonymous, and standardized) into more of a focus on individualized taste (McQuail, 2005, chap. 2) and have facilitated more interactive forms of address with audiences. Media such as television, newspapers, and online forums are also used in classrooms, in political campaigns, and by the government.

Although their function is diverse, through communication practices these actors often influence the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of citizens. However, changes in these institutions and disagreements as to the potential effect on individuals mirrors changes in how citizens, particularly youth, are enacting their role. Perhaps these institutions tend to focus on more traditional citizenship norms, overvaluing a conception that is less relevant in today's world. Further, perhaps questioning the media's authority as well as other established political institutions is good for democracy. As young people are a major focus in this thesis, I now introduce the role of youth within a democratic context.

2.5 The role of youth and conventional citizenship

Young people are often distinguished from other individuals in various ways, and are frequently a focus in the literature on changing democracy and political communication. Some conceptualize youth as apathetic and removed from the democratic process, while others see them developing new ways of expressing their citizenship. Recent scholarly work has argued that young people characterize and experience citizenship in a way that does not fit with the conventional explanations such as traditional views of rights and responsibilities (Coleman & Rowe, 2005). In this section, I examine both of these claims, beginning with an explanation of the youth concept, continuing with the view of politically disengaged youth, and reviewing research that highlights changing citizenship practices.

The youth concept and young people's role as citizens

For the past 50 years, young people have been seen to make up a separate, "problematic" category of individuals, of "non-adults," and have commanded a great amount of research in better understanding this group. At the same time, "very little work has been done to clarify the theoretical basis of this categorisation based on age" (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 8).

Wyn and White see the concept of transition as crucial to conceptualizing youth and argue for a dual understanding of the idea:

In a seeming contradiction, the concept of transition, which has the imagery of process, fluidity, and change, has been harnessed to a static, categorical notion of youth...[the concept] offers instead a perspective on youth as a steady progression through identifiable and predictable stages...stages are assumed to be commonly experienced by a majority of young people – a mainstream (p. 95).

These authors pointed to the general assumption that although the process of a young person transitioning from school to work is seen as fixed for all youth in a particular society, it is actually tied to conditions like economic circumstances and professional opportunities.

It is important to acknowledge this habit of homogenous grouping, but such an elaboration is beyond the scope of this research project. The focus of theoretical relevance here is young people's relationship to citizenship, and in particular, political institutions. Jones (1998) argued that rather than focusing on young people's intrinsic characteristics, youth should be understood as an age-related process. She saw this understanding based on how youth engage with institutions in society (such as those mentioned in the previous section), and claimed that youth's relationship to these institutions is specific to their age demographic. Thus youth are not inherently different from other members of the population, but they do engage with institutions in particular ways.

Evidence for politically disengaged youth

Do you do politics?
More than 75% of young people have taken part in some form of civic activity outside of school hours,
Only 37% of 'young' people voted at the 2005 election,
Young people are least likely to be registered to vote.⁵

This message scrolled across the Do Politics website, an initiative formed by the UK's Electoral Commission. The project, one example of a government-funded initiative, aims to encourage youth electoral participation. Its welcome message demonstrates the discrepancy between how young people show their interest as citizens and what many organizations are trying to encourage.

⁵ Retrieved on June 17, 2005, from <http://www.dopolitics.co.uk/>

Young people are currently exhibiting little interest in conventional politics, and much empirical evidence points towards this disengagement. British young people are becoming progressively more disconnected from governmental and party politics (Wring, Henn, & Weinstein, 1999). In comparison to older Americans or young Americans from past generations, youth are now less interested in and knowledgeable about politics or public affairs, less likely to register to vote or vote, and less likely to become involved in policy matters (Delli Carpini, 2000). Some have argued that young people are the most politically disengaged citizens, contributing to apathy and even alienation (Jowell & Park, 1998; Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992). This can be seen in relation to traditional forms of political engagement, such as voting: Only half of those under 30 (of those eligible to vote) surveyed in the 15-nation European Social Survey in 2002 had voted in the past twelve months; in contrast, 75% had voted among middle-aged and older groups (Norris, 2003d). In the US context, Niemi and Junn (1998) found that young people are waning in their ability to discuss varying elements of government, such as understanding the process of how Supreme Court judges are appointed.

Some see the health of a representative democracy as resting on the extent and nature of citizen engagement (Almond & Verba, 1963; Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003). Disengagement is grounds for apprehension, particularly within the youth cohort: "...young people are at the point in their lives where they are most motivated to construct identities, to forge new social groupings, and to negotiate alternatives to given cultural meanings" (Livingstone, 2002, p. 4). Young people stand at a critical point in developing their civic and political skills, which are predictive of their future behavior. Miller and Shanks (1996) argued:

By the time people are in their thirties, many political inclinations have taken root and do not change much later on. Voting is one of these inclinations, at least for most. Although people often vote with greater frequency as they age, the inclination to vote—and typically, the first actual vote—occurs within the first decade or so of eligibility (p. 58).

These scholars have established a solemn outlook for young people as citizens. Not only are youth not engaged in political matters, but their lack of engagement could also affect their long-term behavior as adults. One explanation is that of generational change, cited by Putnam as "the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren" (Putnam, 2000, p. 283). Essentially, he observed the disengagement

among youth as permanent.⁶ Not all theorists agree that the issue of generational change is as legitimate or serious as Putnam claims. For example, Phelps (2004) described the perceived apathy that young people show as “life-cycle related ‘start-up’ problems in relation to politics...[young people] are more likely to abstain from participation in the political and electoral process than their older counterparts” (p. 238). Therefore, problems with youth disengagement will disappear as time passes and youth turn into more responsible, involved adults.

Coleman (2008) sees these types of citizens as “managed” citizens; in a similar vein, Bennett (2008) calls them “dutiful citizens.” Managed citizens need socialization to learn the skills to properly function in a democracy, and their perceived apathy must be managed in order to create good citizens. Likewise, the dutiful citizen is obliged to participate in preexisting democratic processes, such as voting, and is informed about current events and is heard through traditional participation outlets, such as political parties or civil society organizations.

Studies within this outlook have sought to identify the grounds for political disengagement among young people; they have seen changes in the democratic system, such as the institutional changes outlined earlier, as contributing to a “dumbing down” of important information necessary for citizens to participate to the best of their ability. But rather than focusing on declining activity in the conventional realm, others perceive the way forward as embracing new forms of citizenship expression and the potential they may hold in understanding citizenship in a modern world.

Rethinking citizenship?

The above shows evidence that young people are retreating from normative conceptualizations of citizenship, and this retreat is sometimes seen as a crisis of democracy. Scholars that have rather viewed these changes in the political system in a more optimistic light (e.g., Henn, et al., 2002) see these as beneficial for citizenship, and at the same time call for a necessary reexamination of what constitutes citizenship (Coleman & Rowe, 2005). Perhaps instead of voicing concern about this apparent change in democratic values, it is better to stop defining citizenship solely according to old standards. However, as this section will show, research embracing this viewpoint often still operates within a conventional context, with the ultimate goal of reconnecting young people with institutions.

⁶ Putnam’s work on waning social capital in American society cites generational change as the major factor in the decline of civic engagement and social capital. Other factors include pressures of time and money, suburbanization, commuting and sprawl, and the effect of electronic entertainment.

It has been well documented that particularly young people have a different way of looking at political matters (Henn, et al., 2002). For example, a large telephone survey conducted in the US showed that young people aged 15-25 are less interested and active in consideration of public affairs and in electoral participation, but perform very well in their reported involvement in community and volunteer-related activities (Keeter, et al., 2002).

When research makes room for new conceptualizations of citizenship, it has shown that young people are, in fact, involved. White, et al. (2000) discovered that some young people do not understand the political system and are turned off by politicians, but are concerned about a wide range of issues, and sometimes exhibit this concern by signing petitions or attending demonstrations. Often, such activities are not recognized as traditionally political or are not endorsed as acceptable forms of political engagement. O'Toole, Marsh, and Jones (2003) found that young people are far from apathetic and are in fact very expressive about how they see political issues as playing a role in their lives, particularly in perceptions that are not in line with mainstream politics.

Along with this need to redefine citizenship comes a call to accountability to those in power. Often seen as the cause of the problem, the blame needs to be shifted away from (young) citizens. One study (Coleman & Rowe, 2005) described the alteration in the following way:

It is not young people who are disengaged from politics but contemporary political democracy that has become disconnected from young people. Specifically, governments and the political media have adopted a narrow, inflexible and parsimonious notion of democracy which assumes that most citizens – particularly new and pre-voters – have nothing much to say for themselves. Lacking the techniques of listening, hearing and learning, governments find themselves increasingly talking to themselves, listened to by diminishing numbers of citizens. In a world of interactive communication, politics continues to take the form of an unstoppable monologue (p. 2).

Research has indeed shown that young people, far from apathetic, simply feel that the people in power are not listening to them (O'Toole, et al., 2003). It has been recommended that political elites reexamine their methods of communicating with citizens, since many are critical of the style in which politicians communicate. Coleman (2008) called for recognition of this “autonomous” citizenship, a view that rejects young people as dependent on a system of socialization in order to create their own agenda within democracy. The concept of youth is viewed as a reflexive project, where youth create “narratives of emergence, socialization, and engagement” (Coleman, 2008, p. 191). Likewise, Bennett (2008) saw this model representing “actualizing citizens,” where each citizen finds meaning in individual purpose rather than

government structure, and focuses on issues like consumerism rather than voting to perform an active role in democracy.

Recognition of these types of citizenship provides an important basis for understanding current citizenship practices. But both of the above-described citizenship models exist in the hopes of reestablishing government ties with youth. Because of this, related strategies often remain within a context of conventionality, promoting behaviors that will eventually lead to the creation of government-friendly citizens. Despite institutional attempts to redefine their communication strategy in response to these calls, a protection of normative concepts remains, leaving the essence of citizenship unaltered. The next section explores the foundations of a non-conventional view of citizenship, beginning with an overview of global trends that have contributed to this new way of practicing citizenship.

2.6 Non-conventional citizenship

In recent years a number of theorists have identified changes with great consequences for society that can also be placed within the context of evolving citizenship. The globalizing forces of modernization have been seen to encapsulate worldwide processes and are theorized by a number of scholars (e.g., Beck, 2000; Castells, 2004; Giddens, 1991).

Trends in a second modernity

Several trends are particularly important to acknowledge in understanding the current evolution in democratic thought. Beck (1999) detailed a number of interlinked processes that have resulting in a shift to what he terms a second modernity. The real challenge, according to Beck, is that society must respond simultaneously to each of these processes. Here, I focus on three that are most relevant for the current research: globalization, the emergence of a risk society (e.g., ecological crisis, crash of global financial markets), and issues of legitimacy, particularly in relation to political actors.

Globalization is the transformation of a large variety of economic, political, industrial, and cultural forces from a local, regional or national focus to a global context. It has come of age in a time where single issues are growing in importance, and its strength has been in demonstrating the interconnectedness of issues. For example, climate change has roots in economics as well as in more personal, individualized spheres. Along with a more individualistic view of what citizenship entails comes an acknowledgement of global issues.

For some, globalization also means that democracy in a national context is less relevant: It becomes less about political parties and voting and traditional political knowledge and more

about action on a global scale. This notion of global citizenship “suggests the emergence of a global political order no longer occupied just by states, international organisations and NGOs, but by growing numbers of global citizens who are making their presence felt by corporations and trade regimes” (Bennett, 2003b, p.145). In another sense, globalization represents the increasing ability to interact with those around the world, which on a practical level is primarily due to the increase in communication technologies.

Globalization has also resulted in the rise of global economic powers and communication systems. Because they are not as often regulated by the nation state and more global in their manufacturing and distribution, they are less bound by laws that previously monitored their conduct. Thus, “citizenship is no longer primarily realized in a relation with the state, or in a single ‘public sphere’, but in a variety of private, corporate and quasi-public practices from working to shopping” (Rose, 1999, p. 166).

Risk, according to Beck (1992) has become something both hidden and implicit in today’s society. Risk can be seen in relation to activities previously considered safe, such as the quality of tap water in developed countries. Because of increased risk, citizens fear that government can no longer control or regulate such issues and instead turn to new arenas for political knowledge and action (Inglehart, 1997). This includes taking personal responsibility instead of trusting professional political actors to act; such a shift is also seen in the growing influence of grassroots organizations (Beck, 1992). Therefore, political activity will increasingly take place outside of traditional political institutions. These alternative spheres of information and education will continue to challenge existing political institutions, thus creating an arena in which citizens can reflexively determine their role in democratic society and at the same time, demand an increasing level of responsiveness from governments and political elites. The conventional approach to citizenship as detailed earlier also calls for institutional reflexivity, but the difference here is that the pressure is external: Citizens do not feel the need to work within the system to exert pressure to change it from the bottom up.

In Beck’s work, legitimacy is also key: In order to play a leadership role on behalf of citizens, institutions must be seen as legitimate. Due to globalization, political institutions have seen their legitimacy shrink (Castells, 1997) while those in civil society or issue campaigns gain, but still operate in an historical context where legitimacy was typically granted to institutionalized political action.

Non-conventional citizenship

Within the environment described above, “elite-challenging forms of participation are becoming more widespread” (Inglehart, 1997, p. 236). Bennett (1998) contended that “uncivic” culture is “a society characterized by the rise of networks, issue associations, and lifestyle coalitions” (p. 745). At the same time, citizenship is evolving, and new conceptualizations focus on “new” and “single issue” politics. Giddens (1991) looked to “lifestyle” politics: When local and global issues collide, lifestyle choices become increasingly important as individuals find themselves faced with more and more options that can be deemed political. There is evidence of such a transformation in the British context. Alderman (1999) saw the UK as having “become two nations politically: on the one hand, that of two parties which continue to monopolize power at the parliamentary and governmental level and, on the other, that of the single issue groups and protest movements, whose membership has long since outstripped the active grassroots support the parties can call upon” (p. 128).

Bennett (2003b) described this evolution as “a more typical but less theorised citizen experience in the late modern period” (p. 138). These conceptions see citizens taking matters into their own hands, rather than waiting for official government bodies to take action for them. Political consumerism has entered the realm of citizenship, as some have argued that individuals are consuming goods as citizens instead of as consumers and have pointed to the political nature of certain products (Roddick, 2001; Scammell, 2000; Stolle, Hooge, & Micheletti, 2005; Ward, in press-a). Political consumerism is a relevant example of these society-wide changes and the next section provides an in-depth look at this trend.

Non-conventional citizenship, which is a result of global changes in today’s society, represents a fundamental difference in perception of the political world from the conventional variety. It challenges relevant knowledge and political engagement and participation. It represents a rejection of traditional responsibilities, a move away from institutions and an embracing of alternative elites, and is thus often the result of bottom-up initiatives. Key to its definition is a radical reassessment of institutional actors and how these citizens view and communicate with them. Non-conventional citizenship includes participation in critical events or issue campaigns, and often relates more to personal issues than traditionally thought to relate to citizenship. It is not limited to one’s nation state, and often can be acted out on a global level. To sum up, Figure 2.1 provides a breakdown of essential characteristics of conventional and non-conventional citizenship.

Figure 2.1. Comparing Characteristics of Conventional and Non-conventional Citizenship.

	Conventional citizenship		Non-conventional citizenship
	<i>Managed/dutiful citizens</i>	<i>Autonomous/actualized citizens</i>	
The problem:	Primarily apathetic youth, but also (negative) changes within democratic institutions	Communication strategy of elites (youth not apathetic, but turned off by current elite strategies)	Too much concern about traditional politics and state-focused citizenship; the legitimacy of governments is problematic
The solution:	Youth must change (increase voter turnout and involvement with government/party politics)	Governments/politicians must change tactics in order to draw youth back into the political process	Non-traditional aims on a global scale: issue politics, critical government focus, corporate focus (political consumerism)
The (desired) outcome:	Create conventional citizens	Create conventional citizens	Create non-conventional citizens

Conventional citizenship attempts to connect citizens back to government, and citizenship is primarily viewed in relation to political institutions. In this setting youth organizations usually operate on a primarily top-down level. They embrace a more traditional way of looking at citizenship, encompassing both rights (i.e., civic, political, social) and more notably obligations (i.e., knowledge and civic/political engagement) on the part of the citizen. They promote activities such as voting, participation in political campaigns, or education about political matters. As noted, there are two areas of literature that promote a conventional view of citizenship: The first sees young people as apathetic and generally disengaged from political matters, while the second rejects apathy as an argument, recognizes political acts in new places and encourages institutions to adopt new communication strategies and increase transparency. As argued in this research, however, both are seen to be promoting conventional citizenship since neither challenges the ultimate role of political institutions in democracy. At the heart of

both arguments democratic institutions are seen as necessary, with the “problem” being either citizens’ lack of engagement or communication on the part of elites.

But a truly non-conventional take on these matters is also acknowledged in the literature. A non-conventional citizenship perspective sees it no longer necessary to connect back to institutions, at least in the traditional sense. This take on citizenship critiques conventional strategies and a focus on traditional forms of participation (in Figure 2.1, “managed/dutiful citizens,” as described by Coleman, 2008 and Bennett, 2008), but also turns away from simulated non-conventional strategies (in Figure 2.1, “autonomous/actualized citizens”) that in the end seem to work to facilitate these same forms of participation. Further, non-conventional citizenship sees a blurring between one’s identity as a citizen and other identities previously relegated to individualistic, lifestyle and consumer realms. The (autonomous/actualized) conventional view recognizes these changes, but the non-conventional view takes a step further and grants a full legitimacy to non-conventional citizenship. This theoretical separation is key in this dissertation, and will proceed as a two-part division between conventional and non-conventional citizenship. Next, I take a closer look at political consumerism as a prime example of what can fall in the domain of non-conventional citizenship.

2.7 Political consumerism

Theorists have suggested that consumers can be seen as “the primary agents of democracy in the world today” in analyzing “how citizens, and particularly young people, attempt to balance promotion of their personal identity and lifestyle thorough consumer choice with their commitment to global ethical issues” (Micheletti, Follesdal, & Stolle, 2004, p. xiii, citing Beck, 2000; Miller, 1995; & Nava, 1991). In such a climate, political consumerism can be defined as “consumer choice of producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (Micheletti, et al., 2004, p. xv).

The historical and contemporary basis for political consumerism

Political consumerism represents a blurring of the citizen and consumer aspects of people’s lives. The idea of combining these aspects is not new: Individuals have in the past turned to the realm of consumerism to voice discontent with a political life that they were excluded from (Granovetter, 1985; Swedberg, 1997). For example, in the early 1920s, Mahatma Gandhi urged the people of India to stay away from British educational and legal institutions, to refuse employment by the government, but also to boycott British products. Gandhi’s concept of non-cooperation meant that instead of violently protesting against what many perceived as

British injustice, he instead encouraged Indians to find other ways to make their voices heard, like refusing to purchase British goods. Numerous other historical examples of political consumerism also exist.⁷ These examples of consumer protest still happen today, but the nature of political consumerism has changed and now often finds its aim in making a statement where national governments cannot or will not take action.

The current environment of political consumerism is driven by a number of factors, such as parallel changes in the corporate world. The business corporation, that is, an artificial entity with legal rights and duties, is generally and primarily concerned with profit, and with that, how its image or brand is publicly portrayed. Youth also play an important role in this process: “Indeed, today youth itself is a consumable item, in that the superficial trappings of youth are now part of the consumer market...” (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 87). Corporations are primarily responsible to their shareholders while, on the other hand, democratic governments are responsible to their citizens. It may therefore seem counterintuitive to claim that consumer behavior is increasingly being tied to knowledge, attitudes and behavior found within the realm of citizenship. However, this link can be demonstrated for example through the rise in socially conscious business practices. Corporate social responsibility is a term that has existed since the 1950s and since that time has undergone complex definitional change (Carroll, 1999). Simply put, corporate social responsibility is how a corporation operates within a business model to produce a positive influence within society. Some say this trend is a reaction to changing consumer behavior, as consumers are increasingly using their spending power to assert their values as citizens in a democratic society (Roddick, 2001).

Although corporations have, for many years, in some way acknowledged a responsibility to society, civic and political organizations have grown increasingly concerned about addressing their practices. This trend leads back to globalization and risk. Corporations have always wielded some level of power within their own countries or governments, but Scammell (2000) noted the role globalization plays in accepting corporate power: “...by drawing attention to their capacity to escape state regulation, they inadvertently highlight their own responsibility for good or ill...in the process, they politicize consumption” (p. 353). Beck (2000) argued that corporations have the ability to engage in what he terms sub-politics:

⁷ Political consumerism as a form of activism is seen in a variety of instances over time. Stolle et al. (2005) provide an extensive summary, including the White Label campaign in the early 1990s that appealed to American women to buy sweatshop free cotton underwear for themselves and their children; the 1960s saw the United Farm Workers use consumer boycotts to pressure farmers and landowners in California; and the use of political consumerism by African-Americans in boycotting for the civil rights movement, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Globalization allows them to gain against governments because of access to global labor markets and other resulting economic advantages. Because of increasing corporate power, the citizen becomes aware that traditional political behavior within the nation state will not adequately influence the pressing issues of sweatshops, environmental destruction, and other problems inherent in a global marketplace.

On an individual level, Scammell (2000) has referred to those engaged in political consumerism as citizen-consumers: “A model of citizenship, with some of the classical republican dimensions of civic duty, public-spiritedness, and self-education is an increasingly apt description of consumer behavior” (p. 352). She argued that consumers – if they are socially conscious and think of themselves as citizens when making purchasing decisions – are no longer only active within a model of consumerism. So a citizen-consumer is also a smart shopper. She is aware of the brands that she wears and what they stand for, and she exercises her spending power in a socially responsible way. Consequently, as corporations continue to leave behind the regulation of the nation state, the citizen-consumer will increasingly become an important counterbalance.

Empirical research has found that political consumers are resourceful, highly educated and affluent, and has demonstrated corresponding high rates of political interest and participation. Others focusing on a student sample showed that lack of trust in political institutions is commonly found among those interested in political consumerism. However, these individuals also displayed more trust in fellow citizens and have high rates of political self-efficacy (Stolle, et al., 2005).

Typologizing political consumerism

Political consumerism represents a shift in focus from the government to the market. This results in a change in the balance of power between producer and consumer, but also between the citizen and the government. Scammell (2000) said, “Citizenship is not dead, but found in new places...the site of citizens’ political involvement is moving from the production side of the economy to the consumption side” (p. 351). She argued that realms traditionally considered to be the property of the consumer are now becoming infused with more citizen characteristics (see also Dahlgren, 2003); she cited environmental groups, consumer watchdogs and action groups as prime examples of this shift.

Given its rich history, the study of political consumerism has resulted in a variety of definitions. Some regard political consumerism as incorporating both individual and collective acts (Micheletti, et al., 2004) while others distinguish between political and non-political

consumption, arguing that contemporary political consumerism goes beyond boycott action in that it is more of a routine pattern of behavior that also includes “boycotting,” or deliberately choosing certain products (Andersen & Tobiasen, 2004). Due to the numerous ways of viewing this concept, a typology (see also Ward, in press-a) that draws on current theoretical and empirical work is necessary to develop a further empirical understanding of what it represents.

A socially conscious consumer (SCC) can be defined as “a consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change” (Webster, 1975, p. 188). She makes an effort to purchase products that are fair trade, made from recycled products, or are not tested on animals. This consumer feels empowered by her purchasing decisions, perhaps because she views her consumption as political and the act of a “cool citizen,” one who enjoys “the choice and pleasures of consumer society but [does] not want to support the bully over the little guy” (Scammell, 2000, p. 353). Perhaps certain brands are a large part of her daily life so she needs to be more involved in the product’s image because it is a part of her own identity. She sees the simple action of purchasing a particular product – and thus purchasing what that good stands for – as a political act.

The SCC mainly restricts the exercise of political consumerism to her wallet. But does such consumption really relate to citizenship? Bennett (2003a) said that even for those citizens who are not interested or even actively avoid politics, “their fashion statements and product choices may matter in social image terms” (p. 6). But is the SCC truly acting as an aware, informed citizen simply by purchasing products that are marketed as socially conscious? Or is she merely satisfying an internal, “feel good” mechanism set off by opportunities intended to do just that?

Distinguishing the motivation behind purchasing products can be difficult, and has been tackled recently in the literature. For example, Keum, Devanathan, Deshpande, Nelson, and Shah (2004) differentiated between socially conscious consumption and status-oriented consumption. Socially conscious consumption, as defined above, was operationalized with green consumption and cause-related consumption. Status-oriented consumption was defined as focusing on individual needs and thus having less concern for others, and was operationalized by querying fashion, luxury travel, and gourmet food purchases. But what about a luxury travel package that is advertised as environmentally friendly, such as eco-tourism? Given that our society is so infused with (particularly corporate) messages about socially conscious consumption, it can be difficult to distinguish the internal motivations for purchasing. As the trend of socially conscious consumption grows so does its relevance to the evolving political

world. If civic-political organizations are also using such a strategy, then it is also likely that they will attempt to tie such purchasing behavior to more political behaviors, such as protesting.

The critical citizen consumer (CCC) acts as a SCC when purchasing products marketed, for example, as fair trade or biological. But she goes beyond consumption behavior and embraces a more political identity, taking her spending habits one step further by participating in any number of organizations that are active in holding governments and corporations accountable to their claims. Where the SCC educates herself primarily to inform purchasing, CCCs use information to act and become involved. Therefore as a CCC, she monitors corporate action and joins likeminded others intent on keeping global giants in check. As Bennett (2003a) notes, the younger generation that is abandoning traditional politics is forming a global citizen movement, intent on holding various organizations accountable or spreading a relevant message.

CCCs are active in forming networks and associations around political consumerism issues from the bottom up, and participating in non-conventional organizations and also sometimes more conventional organizations that embrace issue campaigns. Often such initiatives encourage individual behaviour change but also target corporate practices.

Political consumerism's relation to citizenship

The above typology has broad theoretical applications that go beyond the empirical scope of this dissertation. The focus here is on the civic-political online arena, rather than a corporate climate, and this is the arena that I have chosen as the starting point to explore political consumerism. Given its earlier theorized relationship to citizenship and its relevance in the current political climate, it seems feasible that youth organizations may find a way to embrace young people as SCCs, or CCCs, or both. The empirical research in Chapter 7 examines how civic-political youth organizations are addressing this issue, and how such organizations view political consumerism in relation to citizenship. I plan to explore whether such a focus is possible in a non-conventional setting, but also in a conventional sense, where conventional organizations use interest in political consumerism to show young people the importance of participation in traditional politics. Empirical evidence is of course necessary to demonstrate these claims. As Stolle, et al. (2005) point out,

...the claim that political consumerism has become part of the political participation repertoire of western populations requires systematic evidence that an individual's choice of purchases can be rightfully seen as a politically motivated and consistent form of behavior, and one that can be measured and studied in a reliable manner (p. 249).

2.8 Summary

Starting with a brief sketch of democracy, I provided an introduction into both traditional and more modern conceptualizations of democracy and citizenship. For some, being a citizen entails certain rights and responsibilities. Citizens are entitled to privileges in civic, political and social arenas, but are also compelled to acquire specific types and levels of appropriate knowledge as well as participate in civic and political activities. Various institutions contribute to the formation of citizens, including the government, a range of political institutions, and the media. Young people in particular are both seen as apathetic but also as rejecting these traditional notions of citizenship; they have at the same time been lamented and praised for their changing attitudes and behaviors.

With this in mind, I presented a rethinking of the concept of citizenship, citing a number of theorists that have proposed new reflections of citizenship. Finally, I provided a theoretical model that aims to comprehend this current research. The model is composed of four main elements: conventional versus non-conventional citizenship, and strategic versus reflexive modes of communication. The next chapter discusses the role that online communication plays in current conceptualizations of citizenship, and will return to the theoretical model to examine online content.