



The Youth Challenge: Participating in Democracy

by Alison Byrne Fields

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In the eyes of many who are concerned about the future of our democracy, we have a crisis on our hands. Young people between the ages of 18 and 30 are now the largest voting block in the United States: 43 million individuals making up 25 percent of the electorate.¹ Yet, despite the strength that comes in numbers, this group of Americans is choosing not to participate in the electoral process. Since the elections of 1972, when young people between the ages of 18 and 21 were first eligible to vote, youth voter turnout has dropped by at least 13 percent, a higher rate of decline than the rate for older voters.² In November 2002, with a number of pivotal electoral contests to be decided, less than 13 percent of young people were expected to show up on Election Day.³ This lack of representation at the polls is having an impact: young people's issues and young people themselves are being virtually ignored by candidates.

It's difficult to deny that this is a problem: if young people made better use of their right to vote there could be significant changes in the current political landscape of the country. While the same candidates might be elected to office, the issues that these officials invest their time and energy in could become more reflective of the concerns of our youngest citizens. Federal funding for grant

money for college tuition—as opposed to the student loans that saddle young people for years after graduation—could become a higher priority than prescription drug benefits for seniors.⁴ At the very least the two issues might share the public policy stage. Perhaps there would be more third-party candidates in office as the result of young people's growing disdain for bipartisan politics.⁵

The reality is that younger citizens are not voting in large numbers. But maybe “the problem” is not as clear-cut as it initially seems. Too often, the low voter turnout among young Americans is taken as conclusive evidence that they are not engaged in creating social or political change. Or, even worse, that young people don't care about their country or their communities.

The truth is more complex. Cynthia Gibson, a program officer at Carnegie Corporation who focuses on the question of youth civic engagement, suggests that young people today may be the most engaged generation ever.⁶ Young people are volunteering at higher numbers today than in previous generations.⁷ College students are protesting more than their parents, the baby-boomer generation, did. According to the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute's annual survey of college fresh-

men, participation in organized demonstrations grew to an all time high in 2001.⁸ Across the country, college students have organized demonstrations against and in support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, including students at Hampshire College who passed a resolution condemning the civilian death toll in the war on terrorism. Students at the University of Michigan have organized rallies and petitions in support of affirmative action. Resident advisors at the University of Massachusetts established the first-ever undergraduate employee union to secure better pay and improved work conditions for themselves. Students at Harvard University continued their efforts from the previous year, organizing protests to establish a “living wage” for campus food workers and janitors. The anti-sweatshop movement—which spread nationwide three years ago—continues to have an impact, with students at Florida State University challenging their administrators to join a watchdog group that enforces labor standards for companies that manufacture university apparel, a multimillion dollar industry. Other issues being addressed on campuses include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, racism in higher education and funding for school facilities.⁹ The protests at colleges and universities are coming from the right side of the political spectrum as well, with

students responding to anti-globalization protests from the left with their own pro-globalization and pro-capitalism demonstrations.¹⁰

And it’s not just college students. Kids in high school are fighting to establish gay-straight alliances. Young people in the Bay Area of California are taking on the juvenile justice system.¹¹ High school students in New York City are walking out of their classes to demonstrate their anger over a lack of funding for education.¹² Students in Massachusetts are boycotting standardized tests that they see as being unfair to students in under-resourced school districts.

Youth activism is being manifested in other ways as well. Students are organizing their peers to get teen centers and skateboard parks built in urban and suburban communities across the country. While many schools are not teaching young people what they need to know about electoral participation, some schools *are* requiring students to give their time to their communities through service-learning programs and community service.¹³ Whether they are being directed into volunteer activities by their school or making their own decision to get involved, large numbers of young people see volunteering as a more viable alternative to

other forms of civic and political participation. Young people are also using their power as savvy consumers to “punish” companies that choose to implement unsafe or unjust practices by organizing boycotts and are rewarding those companies that make a commitment to social responsibility with “buycotts,” giving them their business and their loyalty.¹⁴ Young people are working together across lines of ethnic and racial difference. They are finding innovative ways to express their ideas and organize their communities and are redefining for their generation what it means to be a responsible citizen. All the evidence points to the fact that young people *do* care. So is there really a problem here?

Yes—and the problem is the disconnect: young people do not think that the electoral process generates any “tangible” results, particularly when it comes to the issues that they care about most.¹⁵ Without suggesting that there is a hierarchy— that voting is a more important thing to do than protesting or boycotting or organizing your community— young people who make the choice not to vote aren’t taking advantage of all the tools for creating change that have been made available to them. And by not using all of these tools, they are preventing themselves from being as effective as

they could be in their pursuit of better communities and social and political reform.

Missed Connections

Over the past thirty years, voter turnout for young people between the ages of 18 and 24 has declined by approximately one-third, with a minor upswing in 1992.¹⁶ The impact of this lack of electoral participation has been that political candidates are rarely taking younger citizens’ issues into consideration. On a broader scale, young people’s lack of electoral participation has ramifications for the overall future of our democracy. Voting isn’t something that a young American will inevitably “grow into,” like a sweater that’s too big in the shoulders. According to the Aspen Institute’s Democracy and Citizenship Program, “If Americans establish a pattern of voting when they are young they will be more likely to continue that pattern as they grow older.”¹⁷ The opposite is true as well: today’s young people will not automatically “mature” into voters as they transition into different age cohorts, as studies of previous generations have shown.¹⁸

If, then, young people are clearly not participating in the electoral process in large numbers, what is the reason—or reasons—why? Unfortunately, there’s no simple answer. For some, their status as

nonvoters relates to a lack of information or a lack of the necessary confidence to ask the kinds of questions that would help them find out what they need to know. Many young people, for example, don't know how, when, or where to register to vote because the information is not being offered to them in school or at home. They don't know how or where to vote. They may not even know who the candidates are or what they stand for as politicians. (It is a problem that many older voters have as well. Political advertising rarely helps even the most motivated voter get a clear picture of where a candidate stands). Some young people don't vote because their parents never voted. It may never even occur to them that they should register and show up at the polls.

For a large number of young people, refraining from voting is a conscious decision, though their reasons vary. Some reject "the system" because of their belief that it is non-egalitarian or corrupt. They may view other forms of participation as being a better use of their time, if only, for example, because they can see more immediate and personal results. Others can't recognize that their vote might have a direct impact on their lives because the candidates are not discussing the issues that they care about on the Sunday morning news

shows or, more importantly, on the shows or stations that young people are actually watching.

During the 2000 presidential election, Third Millennium, a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization and Carnegie Corporation grantee, launched in July 1993 by young adults¹⁹, conducted an analysis of media buys by both major party presidential candidates. Although people over the age of 50 make up just under 37 percent of the population in this country, almost 64 percent of the candidate's ads were placed during programming where these older voters were the likely viewing audience. In contrast, while people between the ages of 18 and 34 make up 31 percent of the electorate, just over 14 percent of the political ads were aired during shows that younger voters—or potential younger voters— would likely be viewing.²⁰ So, for example, you were much more likely to catch sight of George W. Bush or Al Gore if you were tuned into *60 Minutes* than if you were watching *Friends*.

This situation has been described many times before as a chicken-and-egg dilemma: young people don't vote because candidates don't discuss their issues and candidates don't discuss their issues because young people don't vote. "We've got a real

disconnect between the rational strategies for candidates to win elections and good strategies for maintaining a healthy democracy,” says Thomas Patterson, a political scientist at Harvard University.²¹ Candidates target their messages, their resources, and their time toward voters who are most likely to turn out at the polls on Election Day. Young people, candidates justifiably believe, are not those voters.

While on staff at Rock the Vote during the 2000 elections, I clearly remember sitting in the audience at the second presidential debate at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. By that time, with John McCain²² and Bill Bradley out of the race, the only candidate who seemed to me to be willing to take a stand on issues of relevance to young people was Ralph Nader, and he wasn't being let in the front door. As members of the live audience, we had been instructed to keep as quiet as possible so that our reactions did not influence the outcome of the debate. I was sitting in a row with Gideon Yago, a member of MTV's "Choose or Lose" news team, and Jeff Chang, a hip-hop writer who, at the time, was covering politics for rap mogul Russell Simmons' 360HipHop.com. All three of us were invested, on both a personal and professional level,

in whether or not the candidates mentioned young people. Professionally, we were looking for a story for the young audience that we were going to report back to. But, as members of that age group ourselves, we were tired of being pushed to the sidelines. When George W. Bush made a statement of concern about the number of uninsured young people just out of school and trying to start their professional lives, I had to restrain myself from making any noise. I was excited by the fact that—for even a few brief minutes—an issue of importance to young people was taking center spotlight on the public policy stage. Considering the fact that it may have been the only time that either of the candidates bothered to mention young people that night, for my colleagues and myself, it was the highlight of the debate.

Who Are They?

Who are the young men and women who collectively make up the group I've been calling "young people"? They're Generation Y (as opposed to X), they're the Millennials, the DotNets,²³ or Generation 9-11.²⁴ They were born between 1977 and 1987. The oldest were babies in the Reagan-Bush era. The youngest went to kindergarten around the time that Bill Clinton first walked into the Oval Office. The climate in which they have been

raised has been influenced by the atmosphere of political cynicism generated by the Watergate scandal and perpetuated by the Iran-Contra hearings, Whitewater, and Monica Lewinsky (or Kenneth Starr—it depends on whom you ask). For those with access to computers, the Internet is a given and a resource for school research, entertainment and friendships. Community can be found in their neighborhood, among their school friends, or in an online chat room.²⁵ They download their music. They are savvy consumers, highly aware of their value to marketers. The majority of them identify neither as liberal nor conservative, preferring to identify as moderates. Those who are willing to align themselves with a major political party tend to be those who have more positive views about politics.²⁶ Regardless of these labels, young people, on the whole, are more socially tolerant than past generations and have higher levels of respect for the rights of gays and lesbians and immigrants. Their own racial diversity influences their willingness and ability to surmount racial and ethnic barriers in order to work together, as well as their desire to influence others to do the same.²⁷ By and large, they don't watch the news,²⁸ but they *were* tuned in on the morning of September 11, 2001. It was a day when their lives were shaken in much the same way that the lives of those belonging to previ-

ous generations were turned upside down by the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X or by the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

In the late 1960s, young people were confronted with a different kind of harsh reality when they, their friends, their brothers, their husbands and their boyfriends were being sent overseas to fight in the Vietnam War, a conflict that many of them did not understand or support. Many began asking why, if they were old enough to fight and die for their country, they were not old enough to vote and make decisions about who was making decisions about their lives. These young people chose to organize their peers—and appeal to older generations. It was this sentiment that eventually led to the ratification of the 26th amendment, giving people between the ages of 18 and 21 the right to vote.

I recently attended a discussion during which it was suggested that one of the distinctions between young people today and those of the baby boom generation is that the baby boomers had more respect for authority. Confronted with images of young people from the late 1960s and early 1970s—climbing over the fences at Woodstock, taking to the streets to oppose the war or to show their support for civil or

women's rights—it is difficult to think of this group as being particularly mindful of authority. But perhaps there is something to this idea.

In the 1960s, when young Americans recognized that they were not being heard on an issue that was impacting their generation, they fought to gain the right to vote: they looked to the traditional political process as a mechanism for addressing their concerns. Today, young people have that same mechanism at their disposal but, lacking respect for the impact of the political process and for the authority of elected leaders, they choose to look elsewhere to find solutions for the issues that affect their lives.

In that first election after the 26th amendment was passed, American voters re-elected Richard Nixon to the presidency. Just a short time later, after the Watergate revelations, he became the first president forced to leave the White House under humiliating circumstances. In the following years there have been many more scandals and sensationalized events. Young people have seen their president's sex life plastered across their television screens. They have heard about elected officials accepting illegal campaign contributions and have seen a number of them resign in disgrace. They have watched major corporations and other monied interests hijack the political process by buying

influence and power. In the last presidential election, young Americans saw our nation's leadership at the highest level come down to the question of whether or not a chad was dimpled, pregnant or hanging. They have heard candidates and elected officials tell them to "Just say no,"—or suffer the consequences—while excusing their own former drug use as "youthful indiscretion." In this atmosphere it is not difficult to understand young people's distrust and their need to ask, "What exactly am I meant to respect?"

Where Do We Go From Here?

Those who are concerned with and committed to youth civic engagement are divided among themselves about which strategies are most effective for increasing engagement and about the outcomes that might actually constitute success. In other words, what does an engaged young person look like? Is he the high school student who volunteers at the soup kitchen every Saturday? How about the 18-year-old who is proudly wearing her red, white, and blue "I Voted" sticker on Election Day? What about the kids who chain themselves to the front door of the local Starbucks to protest globalization?

According to a recent report that synthesizes the literature and views of various constituencies and experts on these issues, the approaches to fostering

youth civic engagement tend to fall into four general categories:²⁹

1) **Civic Education.** Those who advocate for school-based civic education as a tool for increasing youth engagement believe that there is a need to develop innovative new courses that teach the “fundamental processes and instruments of democracy and government.” They point out that as schools have de-emphasized civic education over the past thirty years, there has been a parallel decrease in young people’s level of civic engagement over the same time period.³⁰ And many believe it is particularly necessary to provide civic education in both elementary and high school because a significant number of young people do not attend college. The discrepancy in voter turnout between college students and young people of the same age who do not go on to higher education emphasizes this need.³¹ No matter when it is taught, advocates believe that a rich and relevant civic education curricula must be developed or students will be turned off and will be unable to see the connection between what is happening in the classroom and what is happening around them in the community and the broader world.

2) **Service-Learning.** Service-learning is a form of civic education in which “lessons from vol-

unteer work are integrated into school work on democracy and public policy.” Its advocates believe that the strategy encourages young people to get involved in their communities while helping them to make the connection to public policy and more long-term systemic change.³² Proponents of this strategy also believe that through service-learning, students can be encouraged to make the leap from “simply reading and talking about democracy to actually participating in it.”³³

3) **Political Action, Advocacy, and Social/Community Change.** Those who are committed to increasing political action—particularly voter turnout—include the Youth Vote Coalition, which is focusing on trying to get candidates and elected officials to pay more attention to young people and their issues.³⁴ With the same goal in mind, the Aspen Institute’s Democracy and Citizenship Program has developed a toolkit to better enable candidates to reach young voters with effective messages that might encourage them to make it to the polls.

Some of the suggested strategies for reaching young voters include committing to using a minimum level of resources to conduct outreach to young voters; learning how to relate issues to young people in a way that makes them relevant; taking elec-

toral campaigns to where young people spend their time; and making information about campaigns available on web sites and in places where young people hang out with their friends. Finally, candidates are asked to come right out and ask young people to vote.³⁵ The strategy for both Youth Vote and the Democracy and Citizenship program is to transfer some of the onus onto candidates to address the issue of low youth voter turnout. Young people can no longer be the sole source of the blame.

4) **Youth Development.** Youth development experts view civic engagement as a developmental process—one in which developing a “strong sense of personal identity, responsibility, caring, compassion and tolerance” is an essential first step toward being engaged politically or at the community level. Youth development relies heavily on young people being directly involved in providing the solutions to their own disengagement, rather than a more “top-down” approach that blames young people rather than supports them as individuals with a wide range of assets and strengths.³⁶

A growing number of experts believe that, in order to truly achieve the goal of ensuring that young people are participating in the democratic process, it is necessary for civic engagement advocates to work together to integrate their approaches. Com-

bining strategies could also help to achieve greater consensus on what engagement looks like and might go a long way toward dismantling a hierarchy in which volunteering shows up on one end of the spectrum, nonviolent civil disobedience on the other, and both are considered to be just fine for the time being—until we can get young people to vote.

Young people who do consider themselves to be engaged and who do vote will tell you that having parents who talked about public affairs in the home or took them to the polls as children has increased their own interest and participation in politics. (The fact that previous generations’ voter participation is in decline has, therefore, had a diminishing effect on the level of young people’s participation.) In addition to having engaged parents, students who have been exposed to civic education in school report that it had a positive impact on them.³⁷ Having friends who participate can also be influential. Finally, for many young people, the mere fact that someone bothered to ask them to was enough of a reason to get involved—including myself. My own impetus for becoming interested in political change occurred when I was 15 years old and Father Richard Carderelli, the priest at my Catholic high school, asked me to attend a conference on nuclear disarmament being run by college students at Yale. His request instilled in me an

amazing sense of pride and confidence because a man that I admired thought that I was important and capable enough to participate.

Accepting the Challenge

Clearly, there is great concern on the part of many about the low numbers of young people who turn up at the polls on any given Election Day. But while it may be simply human nature to want young people to share the political values of preceding generations—at least as far as using the right to vote—perhaps the time has come to recognize that they are not participating in this seemingly fundamental aspect of democracy because, in their eyes, it does not help them to achieve the goals that they view as important: improving their communities and generating positive social and political change. To achieve these goals, young people, instead, are volunteering, organizing their communities, protesting, and boycotting in record numbers. Young people are using media and technology and working across lines of racial and ethnic difference to redefine what it means to be an engaged citizen in the 21st century.

The challenge, therefore, that we face as a society, is how we can help young Americans to link the issues that they care about with their desire to have

a tangible impact on improving their world and help them see that their participation in our democracy can be the key to bringing about social and political change. How can we best provide them with the support that they need? How can we strengthen young people's effectiveness and help them to grow confident enough to take on new challenges? How can we influence candidates and others in positions of leadership to take up their portion of the responsibility for engaging youth in issues of social, civic and political importance?

There are other challenges at hand. If young people continue to reject the electoral process as a useless tool and retain their nonvoting behavior as they grow older, what impact will this have on the future of our democracy? How will the attitudes of today's young people influence their children's attitudes toward electoral participation?

Young people today are unique in their experiences and in their resulting approaches to creating stronger communities and political and social change. The time has come to commit ourselves—as a country and as a society—to making them, in every way possible, full partners in shaping the future of our democracy and our world.

NOTES

1. Data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), as reported by the Youth Vote Coalition web site. www.youthvote.org/info/factsheet.htm.
2. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). "Research and Information: Political Participation and Voting," www.civicyouth.org/research/areas/pol_partic.htm.
3. Youth Vote Coalition, "Terrorism, Economy and Crime Weigh Heaviest on Minds of Young Voters. Balance of Congress May Hang on Efforts to Turn Out Youth Vote in November," September 30, 2002. www.youthvote.org/news/pressreleases/pr100302-oct3event.htm.
4. The average graduate of a four-year private institution, graduating with a B.A., has more than \$17,000 in student loan debt. American Council on Education, "How Much Student Loan Debt does the Average Student Accumulate?" 1999-2000 National Post-secondary Student Aid Study. www.acenet.edu/faq/viewInfo.cfm?faqID=21.
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7. Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, Jenkins. *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, September 19, 2002.
8. Higher Education Research Institute. "College Freshman More Politically Liberal than in the Past, UCLA Survey Reveals," January 28, 2002. www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/01_press_release.htm.
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17. Democracy and Citizenship Program. *30 Million Missing Voters: A Candidate's Toolkit for Reaching Young Americans*. Aspen Institute, 2000.
18. Carnegie Corporation of New York. "The Youth Vote: Defining the Problem and Possible Solutions," *Carnegie Reporter*, Volume One, No. 2, Spring 2001. www.carnegie.org/reporter/02/vote2000/vote.html
19. Third Millennium, Advocates for the Future. www.thirdmil.org
20. Third Millennium. *Neglection 2000*. www.neglection2000.org
21. Goldstein and Morin. "Young Voters' Disengagement Skews Politics," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2002, page A1.
22. John McCain's appeal to young people was due in part to the fact that he was fighting the influence of "big money" in politics—a concern of young people because of its capacity to diminish their own power and influence. His appeal also resulted from his ability to tap into the concerns of both liberal and conservative young voters. Prior to the Republican presidential primary in California, I personally recall registering a number of young people who were switching their party affiliation from Democrat to Republican due to their desire to show their support for McCain.
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