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# Introduction

“Will they turn out to vote this year?” With every election, it seems that this is the question most commonly asked about young adults. Unfortunately, the answer isn’t always clear. After years of steady decline, the 2008 election marked an uptick in youth voter turnout rates and, seemingly, in political interest and enthusiasm as well. Then came a 6 percent decline in rates in 2012, followed by record low rates of registration and turnout in 2014. As the 2016 election loomed on the horizon, yet again, there were signs of hope. Youth voter turnout rates throughout the primaries and caucuses broke records.<sup>1</sup> In classrooms and around campus, students were talking about the election, turning out in record numbers to debate watches, and rushing to register to vote. Still, we found ourselves wondering, “will this enthusiasm last?”

The Millennial Generation, those born between about 1980 and 2000, is an age cohort that is demographically unique and brimming with democratic promise, and yet it’s a body filled with contrasts and contradictions that challenge our understanding of them as citizens. These dichotomies permeate not only their voting behavior but also media coverage of Millennials, scholarship on youth engagement, and even the attitudes of young adults themselves. As the oldest members of the Millennial Generation approach 40 years of age, the time is right to take stock of what we know about this body of citizens; to address these contrasts and contradictions and, hopefully, make some sense of them; and to chart a course for future study and better understanding of this sizable portion of the citizenry.

To be sure, fluctuations in turnout rates make it difficult to get a handle on young adults as voters. The media frame through which the Millennial Generation is covered also offers a muddled picture – one that emphasizes the impact of the generation on the workplace, the economy, and culture and yet depicts Millennials as having a negligible effect on politics. Contrasting academic conclusions about the democratic health of young adults confuse the matter even more. At one end of the spectrum, low turnout rates among young adults spark alarm, even prompting one scholar to wonder if they'd been “exposed to some anti-civic X-ray that permanently and increasingly rendered them less likely to connect with the community” (Putnam 2000, 255). Others, who are less alarmed about rates of turnout, are heartened by young adults' sense of citizenship – characterizing it as one that “includes an ethical and moral responsibility to others in the polity, and beyond” (Dalton 2009, 23) and manifests itself in “non-electoral activities such as buying products for political reasons and being active in civil society groups” (Dalton 2009, 29).

These contrasts are seen in the attitudes of young adults themselves. Survey research suggests that Millennials possess healthy levels of political confidence and believe their vote can make a difference, and yet indicate little willingness to make use of the political process to solve public problems. Educators even see these dichotomies in the classroom – some students are critical of their generation and its sense of citizenship and others laud its promise.

For the past 20 or so years, Millennials have been a generation in progress and that's made it difficult to make definitive pronouncements about the quality of its citizenship. Instead, much of our effort has been directed towards comparing Millennials to generations of the past and declaring them either “engaged,” “disengaged,” or somewhere in between. Moreover, scholars have broached the topic of youth engagement from a fairly common approach and using a fairly common methodology. This text offers a contrast – an examination of how “citizen now” is engaging in the political process and connecting with democracy, the issues prompting their actions, and what they hope to accomplish

with their activities. The qualitative methodology employed, case studies of three youth-led organizations, offers a fresh take on the subject of youth political participation that promises to inform future study.

The text's overarching argument is that the Millennial Generation is a generation worth understanding, given the impact it stands to have on democracy's future. Our somewhat myopic approach to studying youth engagement has limited our understanding, though. Conceptually, debates have centered on the appropriate rendering of engagement – one focused on traditional definitions of political participation versus a more enlarged sense of engagement. This conceptual debate has filtered into the theoretical frameworks used to study youth engagement and, thereby, have informed scholars' varying pronouncements about the health (or lack thereof) of youth participation. Throughout, scholars have focused nearly exclusively on the actions of young adults in the aggregate (often as they compare to other generations) rather than other meaningful facets of participation.

By looking at youth engagement from another angle, the viewpoint of youth-led groups formed around an issue important to young adults, there's much to be learned about the nature of engagement among "citizen now." Most importantly, this approach suggests that youth-led organizations offer a promising route (albeit with some limitations) for reaching and representing young adults and even teaching the skills of citizenship. Moreover, such efforts manifest a mixture of youth sensibility and savvy with quite traditional elements of politics – elements that often are discounted by those motivated by a traditional understanding of engagement and overlooked by those who view engagement broadly.

### **The book's origins and purpose**

*Citizen now* was conceived where many books are conceived – in the classroom. A political scientist by training, I find myself in a growing field of teacher-scholars within the discipline dedicated not only to educating my students about the science of politics but preparing

them to be informed and engaged citizens. In my teaching and work with students, then, my purpose is twofold – to lay a theoretical framework of young people’s engagement in the civic and political community and to compare and contrast it to the realities of youth engagement. Often this is done in conjunction with political learning opportunities such as conducting voter registration drives around campus or administering workshops in local high school classrooms.

In preparing to teach the topic of the Millennial Generation and its role in the political process, it became clear that, although the volume of both the academic and popular discussion was quite high, the voices were far from in unison when it came to the political engagement of young people. The texts available offered starkly different conclusions. More meaningful perhaps, and another source of motivation for writing this text, was the approach and tone of these works – either terribly dismal and critical of young adults for not matching the behavior of previous generations or utterly hopeful, offering boundless enthusiasm for the engagement of the generation but providing little evidence of its effects. As students are being introduced to the fundamentals of American political thought, elections, and research methods, there also seems to be a need to consider these topics from their perspective – through the viewpoint of young adults.

*Citizen now* is meant to be a resource to which students of politics, as well as educators and practitioners, can turn for both theoretical understanding and practical advice regarding the Millennial Generation. In short, it offers a synthesis and critique of both popular and academic consideration of the political engagement of young people that highlights how we have studied youth political participation, what we’ve learned, and where we’ve fallen short. This effort is then complemented with an example of how we might look at the subject matter differently and what we can learn from this new approach. The text’s central assertion is that our understanding of the political engagement of the Millennial Generation, an age cohort that stands to significantly impact democracy’s future, is confused and limited due not only to contradictions within the generation but also to our scholarly approach. By changing our perspective, we stand to deepen our understanding.

To underscore the importance of better understanding the causes and consequences of the civic engagement of this sizable portion of the citizenry, the text begins with a detailed description of the demographics of the generation and their political participation. Utilizing publicly available secondary data, including data from the US Census Bureau and the American National Election Studies, a detailed description of the demographics of the nation's youngest cohort is offered as well as the historical context in which this generation was raised. In addition, the nature and intensity of political participation among young adults is described. Over the years, widely disseminated survey research, working papers, and special reports regarding youth engagement by such institutions as the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Harvard University's Institute of Politics, and the Pew Research Center have provided timely and useful data, but of a localized and time-bound nature. *Citizen now* pulls together this piecemeal information and offers readers a fully sketched portrait of the generation and their involvement in the political process.

Nearly as important as the demographics and activities of Millennials is how they are perceived. This book explores the media frame through which this generation has been viewed by systematically examining news coverage of Millennials that has appeared in leading national newspapers as this age cohort has matured. We know that the media play a critical function through "gatekeeping" and that the manner in which the press presents or "frames" the news affects the public's perception of politics. Through content analysis of this collection of news articles, conclusions are drawn about how this generation has been perceived over time and why these perceptions matter as we consider their lives as citizens.

The heart of the text is a critical review of the scholarly literature that addresses the state of youth political engagement. The conceptual frameworks utilized to understand the phenomena of engagement have evolved throughout the history of the discipline of political science. Earlier conceptions, those of Milbrath (1965) and Verba and Nie (1972), conceived of "engagement" as political in the strict sense of the word – activities designed to influence the

make-up and action of government, with a heavy emphasis on voting. Over the years, this conceptualization has broadened considerably and engagement has come to be understood as multi-faceted in nature, including such activities as contributing to a political blog, “buycotting” or consumer activism, and even verbally challenging someone who states something offensive (Levine 2007; Macedo 2005).

Much of the scholarly literature regarding the Millennial Generation extends this trend – broadly envisioning the notion of engagement (Dalton 2009; Rimmerman 2005). Early on, Verba and Nie pronounced that one’s evaluation of a group’s democratic health tends to be a function of how democratic participation is defined (1972, 29). The notion certainly rings true when we explore the body of literature addressing youth participation. For those who maintain a fairly traditional definition (Putnam 2000; Wattenberg 2012), the state of youth engagement (characterized by low voter turnout) is considered to be quite poor. For those with a broader definition, the quality of youth engagement today, with less emphasis on traditional engagement but notable rates of activism (especially via social media), signifies a new and possibly even more robust iteration of democracy.

This text argues that this exercise has given us an incomplete understanding of youth political participation. What gets lost in debates regarding the definition of engagement and the health of youth political participation is a clear and complete appreciation of *how* youth are engaging in the world of politics, *why* they are taking the actions they’re taking, and *what* they’re accomplishing. This is due mainly to our tendency as political scientists to study youth engagement in a limited manner – nearly exclusively utilizing the “political actions” approach. As Brady (1999, 742–744) lays out in his assessment of the discipline’s study of political participation, there are three approaches to studying political behavior. The “political actions” approach, heavily reliant on survey research, focuses on describing the political acts an individual or group of individuals pursues. The “institutions” approach focuses attention on the context in which political activities can occur – institutions such as organizations, workplaces, churches, and families. The “problems”

approach aims to identify the issues or problems that might prompt actions and then examine the activities the problem prompts.

For the most part, we've looked at the subject of youth political participation in one way and our arguments have swirled around the same subjects. For various reasons, restricting ourselves not only to one approach but nearly exclusively to one methodology (survey research) has drawbacks. Given stark inter-generational differences, there are limits to looking at youth engagement through a generational lens or ascribing the quality and intensity of youth political participation to features unique to their generation and the times in which they've come of age. Moreover, although highly valuable, the use of survey research (especially longitudinal) is far from ideal in the study of Millennials' political participation – the utility of common measurements of participations between generations is debatable, as is the representativeness of samples of youth populations.

Analysis both of the demographics of the Millennial Generation and the manner in which we've studied their political behavior suggests that there is value in approaching the subject matter not only from a different starting point but with a different methodology. A culminating argument advanced in this text is that the discipline would benefit by considering youth engagement from the perspective of the problems or issues prompting behavior as well as the groups concerned with these problems. Moreover, utilizing a qualitative methodology would allow researchers to view political participation from the vantage point of the objects of study – young people themselves.

In an effort then to chart a different course of study, case studies of youth organizations that have engaged the political process are offered. In addition to a fresh approach, these case studies suggest possible themes or categories that might inform future theoretical frameworks and research designs. Specifically, the three groups that are highlighted organized in response to the top issue overshadowing the Millennial Generation – their economic health. Although their missions and structures differ, San Bernardino Generation Now, The Can Kicks Back, and Young Invincibles provide a glimpse into the motivations, strategies, and end goals of

young adults engaging the political process in an effort to advance the interests of other young adults. These case studies add to our understanding of how young adults today go about such work and suggest a path as we further develop our theoretical understanding of youth political participation and the methods for studying it. Specifically, the activities of these youth-led groups, although multi-faceted and supported by contemporary tools, are consistent with traditional conceptions of political action – conceptions that aren't always given full consideration in our current research on Millennials as political actors.

The potential benefits of these case studies extend beyond research and theory, though, and into practical politics and democracy. Although the Millennial Generation is large in size and scope, its connection to the political process, voting in particular, is tenuous. By highlighting and examining prominent youth-led efforts to address a problem confounding young adults, this effort also offers a model to students of ways in which their peers are engaging in politics and democracy.

### **Plan of the book**

Over the next six chapters, *Citizen now* will offer a comprehensive depiction of Millennials' demographics and behavior, a synthesis and critique of our study of youth political participation, and case studies of three youth-led and youth-focused groups that allow us to rethink how we study young adults as citizens. Given that this text was in many ways inspired by and written for students, each chapter offers exercises to deepen understanding of the subject matter. "Think It Out" offers prompts either for written reflection or class discussion and "Act It Out" includes hands-on political learning opportunities that, hopefully, link our thinking about politics with the doing of it.

Chapter 1 provides the context necessary for our consideration of the political engagement of young adults. In this chapter, the Millennial Generation is situated in the succession of generations preceding it and the milestones of the time period in which this group has matured are highlighted. Using multiple

sources of secondary data, the key demographic features of the Millennial Generation are outlined, including current and projected size, ethnic diversity, educational attainment, and social media habits. Finally, through content analysis of a database of over 300 news articles, conclusions are drawn about perceptions of the generation – including our perceptions of them as political animals.

With the demographics of the generation firmly established, Chapter 2 provides a picture of the political participation of young adults, including the current voting behavior of young adults, longitudinal data on Millennial voting, and inter- and intra-generational comparisons in voting rates. Extra-electoral activities also are considered, including participating in campaigns, following the news, and the use of social media or “hashtag activism.” This portrait is juxtaposed with the history of the passage of the 26th Amendment lowering the voting age and the expectations surrounding this milestone.

The critical synthesis of the study of the political participation of young adults can be found in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 charts how the concept of engagement has evolved from a “bullseye” approach focused on direct forms of political action, to one that differentiates these modes into quadrants or a “box-like” approach, to a broader “umbrella-like” depiction in which a number of activities, both political and non-political, fall under the category of engagement. This background leads to a discussion of the study of youth political participation and conclusions that have been drawn about its quality, which are then plotted along a continuum ranging from “disengaged,” to “engaged differently,” to “better engaged.”

Chapter 4 outlines the theoretical frameworks that scholars have used when seeking to explain, predict, and understand youth political participation as well as the methodologies commonly utilized. The most common theoretical approach in studying youth engagement has been generational with a reliance on survey research nearly always focused upon the political actions of individuals rather than issues prompting action or the institutional context in which actions take place. The review of the

literature highlights key aspects of participation that aren't being considered, as well as the benefits of broadening our approach and changing our perspective.

The case studies of efforts led by and for the benefit of young adults can be found in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 reviews the survey research indicating that the economy has been an issue of top concern not only for the public at large but also for young adults. Also offered is a description of the origins, missions, and structures of three groups focused upon the effects of the economy on young adults that emerged in analysis of news coverage of Millennials: *Young Invincibles*, *The Can Kicks Back*, *San Bernardino Generation Now*.

Chapter 6 addresses the research questions explored via the case studies – the activities of these groups, the targets of their actions, the context out of which these actions arise, and the effects of these efforts. This research suggests that the groups engage in a variety of actions meant to raise awareness, serve the public, and influence the political process. Although they make use of the technological tools of their generation, their actions are in line with traditional conceptions of political action with attention to their outcomes and impact.

The final chapter weaves these threads together by identifying what these case studies suggest not only about youth-oriented groups but also young adults in general. Consideration also is given to the normative implications of current and potential research addressing youth political participation, focusing upon the extent to which our current conceptualizations match the ideals of American democracy. Lastly, practical suggestions are offered, rooted in research, of actions parents, educators, policymakers, and even young adults themselves can take in order to encourage and equip them to be active citizens. Ultimately, it's not enough to compare today's youth to previous generations, throw up our hands, and declare them "disengaged." At the same time, it's not enough to idealize today's young adults and offer them as the democratic wave of the future or "better engaged" without demonstrating that their efforts serve the interests of their generation or instructing them how to make use of this enlarged version of democracy. At

the very least, we can take the steps we know will work to ensure that today's young adult – citizen now – is a full participant in the political process.

**Note**

- 1 “Youth Voting in the 2016 Primaries,” Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE): [http://civicyouth.org/youth-voting-in-the-2016-primaries/?cat\\_id=6](http://civicyouth.org/youth-voting-in-the-2016-primaries/?cat_id=6).