AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Stephanie J. Mather for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Accountancy (Honors Associate) presented on May 20, 2009. Title: Millennials and Voting

Abstract approved: _____
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        The current generation of youth, sometimes called Millennials, has had a

reputation of political apathy. However, in recent years, youth voter numbers have gone

up. If an individual or organization wanted to continue this trend of increased youth

political participation, I wanted to explore the areas that could support or even motivate

youth to vote. My paper focuses on the political socialization process, detailing how K-

12 education, the internet, and soft news influence youth. I first looked at historical

trends, comparing the Millennials, to the 1800s and the 1960s. In addition, I looked at

how the lifecycle effect may also account for low youth turnout. In education, I

concluded that rote memorization doesn't work and explored alternative methods to

teaching high school civics. Political information available on the internet has exploded

in recent years, with politicians using Facebook and Youtube to spread their messages.

Finally, youth have turned away from standard evening news programs towards soft news

such as the Daily Show and Saturday Night Live.

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Millennials and Voting

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon
State University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to
any reader upon request.

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Stephanie J. Mather, Author

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1 Introduction

When I began my research project, after much consideration, I settled on creating

a handbook for young people on voting and civic rights. The idea was to write something

witty, clear, and easy to help high school seniors understand the importance of voting in

an era of youth apathy. It could be used alongside a traditional (boring) textbook but

would use current and local examples of theoretical principles. The idea has merit;

however there was one main problem. I was assuming that teenagers weren't smart

enough to figure it out on their own or would fail to take the initiative. If textbooks were

poorly written, and someone from my generation wanted the information, he or she could

simply use the internet to find a myriad of information, examples, diagrams, YouTube

videos, and more. I recognized that writing a handbook wouldn't be adding anything

new that young people couldn't already readily access.

I realized that before I could write about how to motivate young voters, I needed

to understand my generation's current voting habits. Is this generation voting at

drastically lower rates than previous generations? What influences determine whether a

Millennial votes or doesn't vote? I shifted my focus away from a handbook and towards

a thesis that explored this second question. As it developed, my paper came to focus on

what tools youth use in learning about politics. I wanted to see if these tools could be

used by others to motivate and cause an increase in youth voting. In addition, I wanted to

see how the 2008 election challenged prior conceptions of youth voting and if we could

learn new strategies for how to motivate voting.

My research found that key generational trends and historical influences affect the current political climate. While throughout generations, young people have historically voted less than citizens in their later years, the United States political voting history has played a role in the current generation of perceived civic apathy, as I note in later chapters. The proliferation of the internet and other technologies has made getting information easier, while also providing an abundance of data for young voters to sort through. Young adults have turned towards internet news and late night comedy programs as news sources rather than the traditional network evening news. I looked at how using this information could affect whether a young person votes or not. Since high school civics courses are where young voters receive much of their voting training, I compared current teaching techniques to prior methods in order to see what leads to young adults voting or not voting.

Throughout my paper, I write about "young voters" and "the youth vote." I identify my cohort as "Millennials" because it is useful historical design for those who came of voting age around the turn of this century. Political scientists usually consider young voters to be eighteen to twenty-nine year olds. Therefore, when the terms "young voters" and "the youth vote" are reported from research, they will mean eighteen to twenty-nine year olds unless otherwise noted. Where possible, I have included information on a subset of eighteen to twenty-four year olds. This is the group that has recently graduated from high school and has the opportunity to vote in their first presidential election. Data on this subset are not readily available, so most research information here is on the larger group, which is still very helpful in seeing overall voting patterns among young and more likely first time voters.
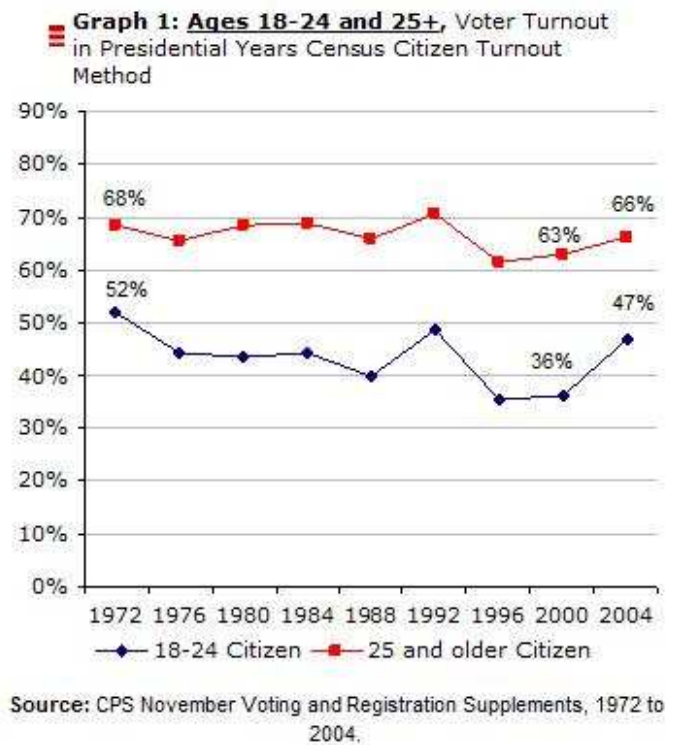
2 Talking About My Generation

      My generation has been labeled with many terms. Some of the more popular ones are Generation Y, Millennials, Echo Boomers, Generation Next, and the Net Generation. Some political scientists who have described the voting habits of the young have called my generation spoiled brats and unmotivated slackers (Mattson 1). Neil Howe and William Strauss labled some in my generation "binge-drinkers, test failers, test cheaters, drug users, and just all-round spoiled brats" (qtd. in Shea and Green 3). Many are said to be "apathetic, self-absorbed, lazy, and certainly indifferent to civic matters… [as well as] violent, promiscuous, lazy, angry, whiny, insolent, and self-indulgent" (Shea and Green 3). It is no wonder that in combination with lower voter turnouts, "in the eyes of many who are concerned about the future of our democracy, we have a crisis on our hands" (Fields 2). After all, democracy by definition and tradition requires an informed and democratically astute citizenry. Thus, as one noted political scientist as observed, "it is hard to imagine democracy operating in a healthy fashion with the levels of public mistrust among young people today" (Mattson 2). According to many older Americans, "youth apathy…should trouble us" (Mattson 2). While I reject many of those labels and stereotypes, I do wish to explore this "youth apathy" more in depth in relation to voting.

3 Current Youth Voting Trends

Eighteen to twenty year olds received the right to vote in 1971. When given the first opportunity to vote in a major election following the passage of the amendment, "52 percent of youth voters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four exercised that right" (Oshyn and Wang, 1). Since then, youth voting numbers have never reached that same high, with voting rates dropping precipitously and remaining low ever since (Oshyn and Wang, 1). However, youth voting may have hit a turning point after its low point in the late 1990s with the elections of 2000 and 2004 reflecting "a clear trend of increased voter participation among young adults" (Oshyn and Wang, 2). The election of 2000 had a youth turnout of 36 percent; the election of 2004 saw an 11-point jump to 47 percent (Oshyn and Wang, 2).

Although the 2008 presidential election has long passed, detailed information on youth voting is still preliminary. According to data of the Tufts University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), youth voting actually increased in the 2004 and 2008 elections compared to the previous two presidential elections. Since eighteen to twenty year olds received the

Graph 1: Ages 18-24 and 25+, Voter Turnout in Presidential Years Census Citizen Turnout Method

Source: CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972 to 2004.

Constitutional right to vote in 1972 to 2000, in presidential election years "the turnout

rate had declined by 16 percentage points among young citizens before rebounding by 11

percentage points in the 2004 election" ("Youth Voting"). In 2004, 47% of eighteen to

twenty four year olds voted compared to 66% of citizens twenty-five years or older

("Youth Voting").

For the 2008

election, exit poll data

suggest a surge in youth

voting compared to the

2000 and 1996

elections. CIRCLE has

estimated that "youth

Figure 1: Voter Turnout Among 18-to-29 Year-Olds, 1992-2008

http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_08_exit_polls.pdf
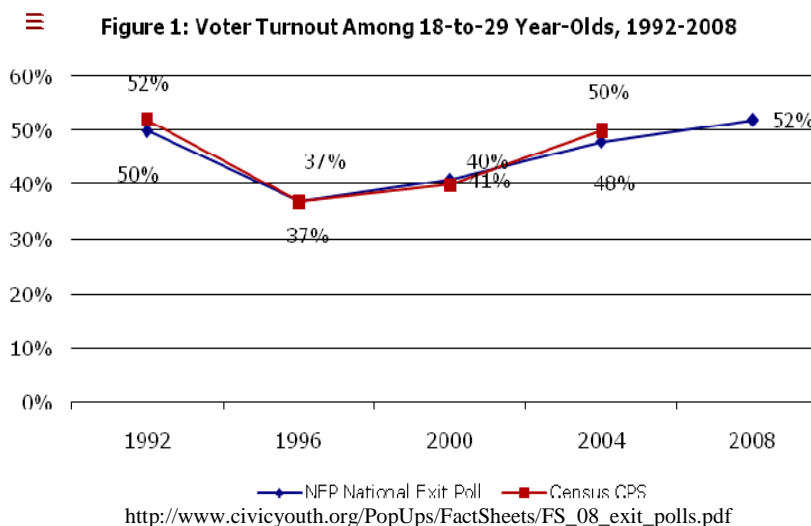
voter turnout rose to between 52 percent and 53 percent, an increase of four to five

percentage points over CIRCLE's estimate based on the 2004 exit polls" ("Young Voters

in 2008 election" 1). Compared to 2000, the turnout in 2008 saw youth turnout increase

"at least 11 percentage points" ("Young Voters in 2008 election" 1). According to these

data, many young voters were also first-time voters: "64% of 18-24 year-olds and 43% of

18-29 year-olds were first time voters…[compared] to just 11% of all voters" ("Young

Voters in 2008 election" 6). This may suggest that tactics in the 2008 election were more

successful in gaining first time voters.

4 The Past Affects The Future

Any analysis of the current voter apathy must be seen against the background of some longer-standing, extensively described traditions. If adults expect to mold and motivate youth, they must understand the historical voter trends. Voting behavior commonly points to two competing approaches: age cohorts and lifecycle trends. The eighteen to twenty-nine year old age cohorts of the 1800s "golden era" in politics and the 1960s activism could provide excellent points of comparison for the Millennial generation. In addition, political scientists have theorized that overarching generational trends have an effect on voting patterns. Regardless of generation, this approach argues, citizens are more likely to vote as they get older and more mature. These two approaches are distinct benchmarks of US youth voting history that have had lasting ramifications on the analysis of current voting practices of young citizens. They highlight something in particular that can be used for comparing the current political climate for young voters and against which current trends can be measured.

In the history of voting and against a very broad historical perspective, the period between 1840 and the end of the nineteenth century seems to provide a point of comparison analyzing patterns in current voting habits of young people. While the 1800s was before precise measurements of youth voting were taken, this so-called "heyday of electoral participation" still offers a good benchmark to compare to today's voting trends. In the 1800s, voter turnout averaged in the 70 percent range, with three presidential elections reaching over 80 percent (Shea and Green 24). This can be compared to current turnout rates, which show that "since 1972, turnout in presidential elections has averaged 55 percent" (Shea and Green 24-25).

Political scientists attribute the high turnout rate between 1840 and 1900 to many reasons. Shea and Green cite mass voter education, major policy debates, massive immigration, and a culture that placed a high value on politics as some of the reasons (25-26). However, it is the strength of the political parties that was the highlight of the period (Shea and Green 25). Political scientists James Q. Wilson and John J. Dilulio, Jr. described the period as a time when "the parties fought hard, worked strenuously to get as many voters as possible to the polls, afforded the mass of voters a chance to participate in party politics through caucuses and conventions, kept the legal barriers to participation low, and looked forward to close, exciting elections" (qtd. in Eisner 60). It was through "local parties manufactur[ing] mass electoral mobilization in America" that these elections received such high turnout rates" (Shea and Green 26). Shea and Green summarized: "when turnout has been high, parties have been active" (26). Currently, as Don Peck put it, contemporary parties have focused on "switching independents that have a strong history of voting" (qtd. in Shea and Green 26).

Although it would be interesting to compare the 18 to 29 age cohort of the 1800s with Millennials, there are two strong limitations preventing comparison. First, eighteen to twenty year olds couldn't vote. Second, only white males, for the most part, could legally vote. These prevent any real analysis on youth voter behavior in the 1800s.

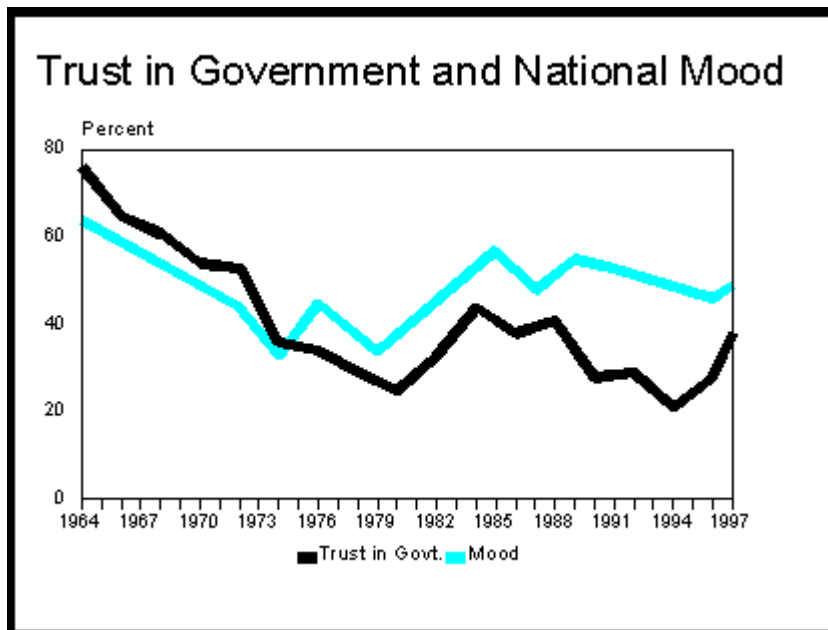Analysts point to the 1960s as a more appealing cohort to compare Millennials with. I could find only a few political scientists who had made detailed studies of this period of youth votes, particularly Kevin Mattson, who called the 1960s "a golden age of youthful liberalism and activism" filled with "big causes" for "progressive and leftist activists" to fight (Mattson 13). Yet it is obviously a critical cohort to consider because

the 1960s motivated political action on many ideal causes. Mattson believes the greatest difference between young voters today and those of the 1960s can be seen in another major shift around higher education. While not all young adults seek a higher degree, the change in focus of those who did offers some interesting insight and comparisons between the two cohorts. In the 1960s, "most students who took part in protest movements and politics majored in liberal arts and the social sciences" (Mattson 18). Since the political activism of the 1960s, there has been a "time of precipitous decline in political participation that," as acclaimed political scientist Sidney Verba noted, corresponds with "the number of students in the humanities and social sciences" (qtd. in Mattson 18). Russell Jacoby also wrote of this same trend: "In the last fifteen years [of the 20th century] traditional majors such as philosophy, history, and English have declined, while business and management majors have doubled" (qtd. in Mattson 18). In 2003, Mattson analyzes these statements by writing that "in bolting from the humanities, young people have simply reflected the values they have received from their culture at large. The message to be economically practical comes from everywhere today…" (Mattson 18). The main argument of Mattson, Verba, and Jacoby is that young adults today have enrolled in higher education programs that are considered more culturally valuable because they are more pragmatic. Prior to the 2008 election, many political scientists have taken a skeptical or even negative view of my generation as being one that no longer values political participation. Seeing it as unimportant to our society at large, where time and energy are money, politics is seen as a waste of both. It is more pragmatic to focus on making money as opposed to focusing on social issues.

The 1960s cohort differs from the Millennials in many ways (see table). One key difference is the political culture surrounding each group. The early 1960s were a time of idealism with Kennedy as president. Political trust was high, with citizens trusting what politicians were

Comparing 1960s and 2000s youth cohorts	
1960s	2000s
Rallies and protests	Emails and websites
Three network television channels	Hundreds of television channels
Liberal arts focus	Business focus

telling them. Cynicism set in during the Johnson and Nixon years, and political trust declined (see chart). Since then, political trust and "satisfaction with the state of the nation have fluctuated somewhat since [the 1980s], but have never fully recovered ("How Americans View Government")."

While many factors have affected current youth voting, the voting trends of young adults are also affected by the traditional adult voting cycle which has more or less followed every US voting generation. In 1974, this cycle was described as "the conventional view… that turnout is lowest at the beginning of adult life, rises to a plateau in middle age, and declines as maturity fades into old age (Lipset 1960, p. 189; Flanigan and Zingale 1975, pp. 25-27; Milbrath and Goel 1977, p. 114)

(Wolfinger and Rosenstone 37)." Data from 1974 support this claim, as one study found "people aged eighteen to twenty-four are about 28 percent less likely to vote than fifty-five-year-olds; those aged twenty-five to thirty-one are about 21 percentage points less likely to vote (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 50)." Researchers in 1996 similarly stated "year after year the turnout rate appears to rise rapidly up to perhaps 35 or 45 years of age. The rate of increase then declines, but turnout apparently continues to go up until old age sets in. Finally, in the last decade of life, voting rates decline (Miller and Shanks 58)." Miller and Shanks propose three hypotheses about this traditional voting trend: "(1) younger cohorts are particularly vulnerable to influence by historical events in their political environment; (2) older cohorts may entertain a 'lifelong openness to change,' but, in fact, reveal great stability in the persistence of earlier orientations; and (3) even in the face of large historical events, long-term societal change may occur largely as a consequence of generational replacement (Miller and Shanks 43-44)."

Much of the research on traditional adult voting cycles concentrates on the post-New Deal generation. This generation's "politically formative years coincided with political events… [including] the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War… [as well as] Watergate, Carter's Misery Index, and the Iran-Contra and Iraq-gate scandals…" (Miller and Shanks 43). This cohort is more likely to not only be Independents, but also more likely to be nonvoters (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 352). Miller and Shanks argue four hypotheses about this generation's impact on voting trends in the United States: "(1) they have added disproportionately to the fraction of citizens with relatively high educational attainments; (2) they have added disproportionately to the fraction of the electorate with no party identification; (3) the non-identified among them contain an

increasingly high proportion of non-voters (when non-identified and identified are compared); and, finally, (4) the sheer size of the youngest generation compounds the impact of all sources of change" (Miller and Shanks 99). According to these scholars, the post-New Deal generation had a pronounced decline in voting when compared to the pre-New Deal and New Deal generations. The question remains as to how much of the decline is related to the traditional adult voting cycle.

The 1800s high voter turnout, the 1960s activism, and the adult voting cycle are three important benchmarks when analyzing current youth voting trends. How much of the percentage of current youth voter turnout is lower due to the traditional adult voting cycle has not been quantified. Mattson and other political scientists point to today's pro-business culture as lowering youth voter turnout when compared to the turnout in the 1960s, yet its influence hasn't been fully researched either. Our political parties, which are weaker compared to the parties of the 1800s, may not be actively pursuing new young voters, contributing to lower youth voting. It may be, according to current sources, that "the context of contemporary politics has turned off a generation…[and] the youngest generation sees little point in starting" to vote at all (Shea and Green 11).

There are many challenges facing those who want to motivate youth voting. Lessons can be learned from historical patterns of youth voting. There are two key approaches to studying youth voting in US history: comparing age cohorts and seeing an overall generational lifecycle pattern. While the 1800s age cohort may not be easily comparable with Millennials, it does offer insight into the power of local party mobilization. The 1960s age cohort is distinctly different from Millennials in several ways, including the 1960s focus on liberal arts instead of the more recent focus on

business. The lifecycle pattern may also explain the difference in political participation between youths and older citizens.

Underlying all of these is the theory of how citizens become politically socialized. Political scientists have identified five key areas for learning political skills. They include family, K-12 education, higher education, media, and peers. Within education, there are differences in the political socialization of those who only receive K-12 education and those who go on to higher education. There are limitations when analyzing youth since some have received this additional socialization and others haven't. The rest of the paper is devoted to the institutions that affect political socialization: education, particularly K-12, and media, particularly the internet and soft news.

5 High School Civics Education

High school is where today's young adults learned about government, history, politics, and voting. It is where they gain the tools necessary to make political decisions. Public secondary education is the formal learning environment our country uses to educate future adult citizens on the basic rights and responsibilities they have. Hence the methodologies and approaches are critical to shifting youth voting practices. Many high schools use senior year civics courses as their last opportunity to teach key democratic principles to teenagers before sending them out into the real world ("Interview with Hall"). This is where young voters receive much of their voting training. It is important to understand how high school government or civics courses pass on political participation tools to their students to help better determine if this could be a point of influence on youth voters. While there are some significant limitations to the effect high schools can have on youth voting, I still believe they are important institutions that pass on tools to youth and participate in the youth political socialization process.

There are several methods educators use to teach voter education in civics. I have attempted to identify and describe prominent and key techniques, though they can be modified and used in combination to fit an individual teacher's preference. The methods I have identified are rote memorization, volunteerism, internal reflection, thinking about the greater good, and deliberation. Each is explored as to whether it helps facilitate or motivate stronger rates of participation in youth voting for the current generation.

High school civics courses are created with the goal of teaching citizens their rights and responsibilities in our democracy. These classes teach how our country was founded, the structure of our government, the rights each citizen has under the

Constitution, the responsibilities citizens have, how laws and policies are created, and

how voting affects our future. The goal of civic education is to make citizens politically

informed with the hope that this will lead to political engagement (Colby, Beaumont,

Ehrlich and Corngold 28). While one study found that "…civics courses do not

contribute significantly to political knowledge or other aspects of political socialization",

most education experts agree that these classes are very important for educating young

citizens (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich and Corngold 45). Some even say that civics courses

are "a crucial sphere for creating citizens who are equipped to exercise their freedoms

and competent to question the basic assumptions that govern democratic political life"

(Walling 77). High school civics instructors also have the "responsibility as citizen-

scholars" to instill in students that by voting "they can make a difference in shaping

[government] so as to expand its democratic possibilities for all groups" (Walling 77).

Educators have to balance all of these goals when teaching civics to high school students.

One method of teaching directs students to memorize for the short term only

enough to pass the test. A professor I had in college called this method "plug and chug."

This teaching style, still used in some social studies classes, involves lessons following

"this mode: the teacher asks a question to which he or she knows the answer, a student

responds…a word or two, and the teacher confirms or corrects the responds and moves

on to another question" (Fuhrman and Lazerson 109). Educators have recently seen the

limitations and shortfalls of using "rote memorization" (Mattson, 39). Young adults will

most likely not remember the principles taught to them in civics courses if they were only

stored in the short-term memory. This method is limited in its long-term effectiveness

and is too often insufficient in giving youth voting tools. Students don't retain and utilize

voting tools when they are forgotten after the last test.

Another technique to teach civics is to use volunteerism as a tool for learning

basic political ideas. This method incorporates "public service, experiential education,

internships, formal lessons about how government works, and more…" as settings for

learning civics (Mattson 39). Connecting service to politics exposes "students to issues

in the community and it reinforces academic content and skills" (Rubin and Giarelli 42).

By helping students to connect grassroots efforts with the overall political environment,

service learning "does not simply promote volunteerism but motivates students to

question why there are social ills in the first place and to address them in ways beyond

direct service" (Rubin and Giarelli 42-43). Teens who learn about our government under

this method get to see practical applications of community involvement in changing the

status quo. An advantage of this method is that it does require students to make the

connection of how politics and government could be involved in the cause they have been

volunteering for. Whether volunteering actually leads to increased voting by young

adults requires further research and study.

Another method recommends prompting students to reflect internally on issues.

Called "sociological imagination," this style has students "interpret their personal affairs

in relation to larger historical and social forces, recognize how those forces enhance or

limit their opportunities as citizens, and act in ways to improve themselves and their

society" (Walling 103-104). Instead of "plug and chug," students learn key ideas for the

long term. By associating personal experiences, students in these classes may be more

likely to read political information in later years and remember lessons learned in high

school. This method actually gives students the tools necessary for understanding and personalizing politics later in life. A potential drawback is its focus on one's own self and personal needs instead of the greater society politics has an effect on.

Another style high school teachers have been using is to have students think of political issues in terms of the greater good. Young people are asked to make decisions that deal "with differing estimates of the worth of various proposals for common action…[and] require skills in moving from first impressions to more reflective and shared judgments" (Walling 105). Teens taught with this method have to go outside of themselves and their own beliefs and weigh options based on the greater good of society. This method mimics the real decision process of many politicians, who have to consider constituent needs and desires over their own. When later deciding how to vote on policy issues, young adults with this background may be better able to consider needs different from their own.

Finally, the deliberation method could be used in combination with other methods described earlier. Students learn techniques for "understanding and engaging in the questions…bringing alternative viewpoints, evidence, and history to bear…developing an opinion and exploring solutions…[and] reflecting on the process and moving forward" (Fuhrman and Lazerson 111). Classmates with different points of views can challenge their thinking and force students to formalize their rationales. In future years, these young adults may be better at articulating their viewpoint to others and translating their view to how to vote on the issues and candidates.

In researching how educators can teach civics to high school students, I found no statistics on the percentage who use each type, or what the common trends are for the

future, or on which method would be best for leading to increased youth voter turnout. Further research in these areas is needed before a definitive conclusion can be made about the role of various high school pedagogies in voter education. Based upon my own speculation, I believe that methods that force students to think, articulate their thoughts clearly, and promote long term memory of lessons learned are more likely to lead to young adults showing up at the polls on election day. Rote memorization probably has the least positive effect on future voting. Depending on the teacher and the community, volunteerism could be effective. Having students think about issues in relation to the greater good may not have the same resounding internal affect as when they consider issues in more personal terms.

Overall, I favor using internal reflection with deliberation. By giving students the tools and having them use those tools before actual voting participation, I believe schooling could lead to a generation of voters who understand politics better than do those taught under the rote memorization technique. I assume that when a person internalizes an idea and can articulate his or her feelings on this subject, that person will be more likely to fully understand and use their beliefs when making, in this case, political decisions. I also assume that, with a higher quality of public education, young adults will have a better understanding of issues facing our society (injustices, problems, etc), and this knowledge will motivate them to political participation in order to solve these issues.

High schools do face some significant limitations in their ability to affect youth voting. Student attitudes and participation in classes play a large role in determining what later in life they use the tools they were taught in high school. If students won't

participate, then they won't learn. Also, schools face pressures from community

members on what course materials may be appropriate for students. While some teachers

may try innovative teaching methods, parents may not appreciate new approaches. I

understand that teachers may not adopt the method I have suggested to be more effective

in teaching civics to youth. However, I hope that teachers and school districts will

consider using it. In addition, it may be effective for colleges and universities training

new teachers to teach the internal reflection with deliberation approach as an alternative

to rote memorization.

6 The Power of the Internet

The feature that clearly distinguishes the context of current youth voting patterns from those of previous generations is the relationship youth have with contemporary media. My generation has been raised in a time of rapid technological developments, bombarded with advertising on multimedia fronts, and rewarded with gadgets like ipods and laptops. Young adults now have flat screen televisions, 200-plus channels, high speed internet, and the ability to surf the internet on their phone anywhere they have cell service. With all of these advancements, the question worth asking is whether the internet, with its websites, instant messaging, and blogs, is being used to educate and mobilize young voters. By studying how youth obtain information through the internet, there may be a way to find how to motivate youth through the internet.

Political scientists have explored the internet as "a tool for enhancing citizenship in the information age" and have come up with positive results (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 49). Through their research, Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal believe that "by facilitating civic engagement, Internet use may represent a more fundamental transformation, altering citizen orientations toward politics and society, and motivating individuals to participate over the long term" (49). One fundamental assumption was that "technological changes have contributed to the ways in which today's young people experience, understand, and participate in politics" (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich and Corngold 32). Based on this, political scientists have searched for whether technology's contribution has been positive or negative on young voter engagement.

While early research found the internet having "little effect of declining civic engagement" (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 49), later studies have concluded that

"the use of online news encourages civic engagement" (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 62). Since "young people continue to go online for political news at higher rates than do older people" (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 63), it is young voters who are most influenced by internet news outlets. It is youth who "have more to learn, [so] the effect of exposure to information may be greater" (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 64).

The same study explored the effect of young voters receiving political information from the internet. Young voters who consume online political news "are more likely to participate in political discussions, have higher levels of political knowledge, and have more acute political awareness, as measured by political interest" (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 65). In addition, the internet "is associated with greater increases in political knowledge among the young. This may be because the young use the internet more intensively…and for a broader range of activities…or because they have lower levels of political knowledge to begin with…" (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 64). Overall, in this study the internet was positively associated with young voter engagement. While future research will still be needed to understand how the ever-changing population within the young voter category is responding to politics via the internet, this points to a positive influence on youth vote turnout. It may not be a deterrent preventing or hindering the youth vote and may be more helpful than hurtful.

With this recent research, one can conclude that the internet can be used by young adults for gaining political knowledge. Yet this doesn't prove that the internet can be effective at reaching not just those already interested in politics but those with little or no political experience. If the internet can present political information, can it also mobilize

new and young voters for a specific cause? The presidential election of 2004 provides

the most in-depth, recent information on the use of the internet for mobilizing the youth

vote.

The 2004 election has been called "the first truly high-tech election"

(Montgomery 179). Political parties and organizations utilized "technologies such as e-

mail and text messaging" for mobilization efforts (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich and

Corngold 32). Four years after the hanging chad debacle in Florida, a new group of

young voters reached maturity and could vote (Montgomery 179). This group had been

influenced by media overexposure and flocked to their outlets of "Web sites, blogs,

MySpace pages, electronic petitions, and online discussion groups… for political

expression" (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich and Corngold 32). Websites such as

"PunkVoter.com, League of Pissed Off Voters, and Vote or Die!" joined Rock the Vote

"in the biggest battle for the youth vote in US history" (Montgomery 179). Traditional

news media faced "a new generation of bloggers" who ended up "scooping stories,

whipping up controversies, and forcing issues onto the political agenda" (Montgomery

179). However while research has found blogs to have little effect on motivating

uninterested voters, they do provide an additional media outlet on the internet for political

enthusiasts (Drezner and Farrell 2004; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, and Wong 2008). The

internet became a driving force for young activists and new voters for confronting the

status quo of American politics.

The 2008 election saw an even more drastic increase in the use and diversity in

the type of technology employed to capture new and young voters. There was a rise in

the use of "text messaging with cell phones, online video use, and social network Web

sites" as opportunities for political engagement (Oshyn and Wang, 6). Campaigns tried

to put "information where it will be found by [young people], but they cannot control

whether young adults see, hear, or read it, nor how those adults will then use that

information" (Oshyn and Wang, 7). Candidates had to be careful to avoid the pitfall of

"YouTube moments" that capture and share embarrassing moments with the world

(Oshyn and Wang, 7). They must balance these negatives with the communication and

connection opportunities that social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace

offer (Oshyn and Wang, 7). Political campaigns have also tapped into "the pervasive use

of cell phones and text messaging by the young generation (Oshyn and Wang, 7). While

these new media outlets provide a new outlet to capture youth votes, many political

insiders are skeptical "that the efforts will boost young voter turnout" (Oshyn and Wang,

7). Additional research will be needed before the effectiveness in turning out new and

young voters can be accurately measured.

The internet has drastically changed the political environment of America. New

and young voters are being targeted directly through websites, text messaging, and

Youtube videos. While my generation's activism and political movements "have roots in

the protest politics of the 1960s, their form and focus are being reshaped by modern

technologies and political concerns" (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich and Corngold 32).

Youth are being reached through multiple media outlets for causes such as

environmentalism, Darfur, AIDS, eliminating world hunger, breast cancer awareness,

literacy, and many more. Clearly, the internet can be successfully used to reach and

mobilize youth, particularly those already interested in politics. In the next few elections,

the internet will be used more and better by both sides of the aisle in order to target young

voters. However, the ability of the internet to motivate previously disinterested youth remains to be seen. More research is needed to determine if nonvoters will become politically active through a strong internet campaign.

7 Television, The Daily Show, and Youth Voting

The form in which voters obtain current political information has an arguably positive and negative effect on voters, particularly on young voters. My generation is exposed to a form of television media remarkably different than those of previous voting generations. Instead of three network channels dominating the airwaves, young voters have access to hundreds of channels via satellite or cable. No longer do ABC, NBC, and CBS control television political dialogue. Twenty-four hour cable channels, such as MSNBC, CNN, and FOXNews, spend hours regurgitating news or news-like information. Late night talk shows like the Daily Show and the Colbert Report are becoming dominant political news sources of political information for young adults. Political science researchers have studied various voter trends in relation to television, including trends with young voters.

Many political scholars have seen effects of new media as directly connected to voting participation in negative ways. Political scientist Gentzkow researched the effects of television on the overall electorate. He concluded:

"What took place in the years after television's introduction was not a broadening of the democratic process, but rather a sharp decline in political participation. Average presidential turnout in both the 1980s and 1990s was lower than in any decade since the 1920s, and outside the south (where a substantial remobilization of black voters muted the decline) it was lower than in any decade since the 1820s" (Gentzkow 2).

He found "that television caused sharp drops in consumption of newspapers and radio, that it reduced citizens' knowledge of politics as measured in election surveys, and the

effects on both turnout and information were largest in relatively local elections"

(Gentzkow 2). Instead of providing more political information, the prominence of

television "offered consumers a wide array of new ways to use their leisure time"

(Gentzkow 24). At the conclusion of his paper, Gentzkow concludes that television

"caused fewer voters to go to the polls" (Gentzkow 24). It seemed to serve more as a

distraction from political participation than an asset.

Over the past few decades, as the term "infotainment" came into usage, the

reputation of television journalism has declined, arguably leading young voters away

from mainstream media outlets. After the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s, the news

media "rode high in public esteem" (Cook, Gronke, and Rattliff 1). Surveys at the time

"period reveal that 'the people running the press' were trusted and admired" (Cook,

Gronke, and Rattliff 1). Yet only two decades later, there is persistent skepticism about

the role of new media "in the wake of another presidential scandal and another

presidential impeachment, the news media are no longer so favorably viewed" (Cook,

Gronke, and Rattliff 1). When people were asked about their feelings about the press in

the late 1990s, they were "more inclined to say that 'the news media gets in the way of

society solving its problems,' and that news organizations generally 'don't care about the

people they report on' and 'try to cover up their mistakes'" (Cook, Gronke, and Rattliff

2).

Given the recent hostility shown to the press, voters have turned away from

conventional news media as their primary source of political information. Research

published in 2004 "attribute[s] lower voter turnout to media coverage, citing negative

campaign ads and horse-race journalism" (Smith and Tolbert 57). Conventional news

media, including daily newspapers and the traditional evening news programs, fail to connect with youth and end up not being where they get their political information. While studies show "that citizens use the media to learn what issues are important," many still conclude that "Americans possess little interest in or knowledge about politics" (Smith and Tolbert 57).

This may be because voters who did watch news media were more educated about political issues, yet the percentage of voters who actually watched conventional news media has steadily declined over the years. The Pew Research Center conducted a study in 2002 that found "the audiences for most forms of television news fell considerably between 1993 and 2002, with the audience for nightly network news down 46%, network news magazines down 54%, local TV news down 26%, and CNN down 28%. Not surprisingly, the sharpest decline came among 18-24 year olds" (Baym 2). A later Pew study "shows that even in the four years between the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, 18-29 year olds [were] increasingly turning away from mainstream sources of broadcast news, with only 23 % saying they "regularly learn something" from network news (compared to 39 % in 2000), 29 % from local news (compared to 42 % in 2000), and 37 % from cable news (compared to 38 % in 2000) " (Baym 2-3). Young voters have steadily turned from hostile news media sources towards, as it seems, late night comedy television.

Thus the research appears to conclude that many in my generation have turned away from mainstream, evening news media for political information and rely instead on late night comedy shows. Political scientists are still arguing and researching the question as to whether higher rates of viewing late night comedy shows are leading to

higher youth voter turnout or lower turnout. Whichever it is, the fact remains that Walter Cronkite has been replaced with Jon Stewart as the authority for news among the group. A 2004 Pew survey "found that 21 % of people ages 18-29 say they regularly learn about news and politics from comedy shows such as Saturday Night Live, and 13% report learning from late-night talk shows such as NBC's Tonight Show with Jay Leno and CBS's Late Night with David Letterman. Among the programs regularly cited as a rising source of political information is Comedy Central's mock news program The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" (Baym 3). In 2004, Stewart's show had an estimated "daily audience at around 2 million people" (qtd. in Baym 3). The importance of his show and the audience it reaches has become obvious to politicians, as when "Senator John Edwards chose The Daily Show as the media venue from which officially to announce his candidacy for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination" (Baym 3). While the positive and negative effects of Stewart's comedy have been studied and argued, many scholars agree with "Bill Moyers, the dean of American public service television news," who concluded "that 'you simply can't understand American politics in the new millennium without The Daily Show'" (qtd. in Baym 3-4)."

A new trend in media has been "soft" news, television shows and magazines that combine news and entertainment. Some of the new soft or "infotainment" news sources many voters, not just young voters, have turned to include "network and cable newsmagazine shows, entertainment and tabloid newsmagazine shows, and daytime and late-night talk shows" (qtd. in Baumgartner and Morris 342)." Baum studied the effects of soft news on voters and found that "politically unaware Americans who watched daytime talk shows considered the opposition party candidate more "likeable" and,

consequently, were much more likely to cross party lines, than their counterparts who did not" (25). He believes that politicians should use E-talk shows to connect with voters, since these viewers "are far more prone to be persuaded by candidate appeals, if properly tailored to their sensibilities" (Baum 26). After reviewing the 2000 election, Baum found "that candidate appearances on E-talk shows like the Tonight Show and The Oprah Winfrey Show weighed heavily in the minds of many voters as they contemplated their vote choice" (26).

Of course, other researchers have had some unfavorable conclusions about the Daily Show and similar shows' effect on young voters. While "watching entertainment based programming can contribute to political learning" (342), political scientists Baumgartner and Morris found "The Daily Show may have more detrimental effects, driving down support for political institutions and leaders among those already inclined toward nonparticipation" (341). The Daily Show is a good representative of soft news sources. Pew Research survey information showed that, "although The Daily Show is not intended to be a legitimate news source, over half (54%) of young adults in this age group reported that they got at least some news about the 2004 presidential campaign from comedy programs such as The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live" (Baumgartner and Morris 344). Baumgartner and Morris argue that "because young people are more impressionable… and thus more prone to any adverse effects The Daily Show might have, the political effects of The Daily Show are important to understand" (Baumgartner and Morris 344). Through their research on The Daily Show's effect, they found "that young adults' perceptions of presidential candidates, especially those of lesser known candidates, are diminished as a result of exposure to The Daily Show…exposure to the

show lowered trust in the media and the electoral process… [and] exposure to The Daily Show increased internal efficacy by raising viewers' perception that the complex world of politics was understandable" (Baumgartner and Morris 361-362). They argue that The Daily Show has done more harm than good in providing political knowledge to young voters and bringing them to the polls. The Daily Show, they argue, has lowered the trust youth have for politicians and the political system due to the sarcastic style of comedy the show is known for.

The effects of television, particularly late night comedy shows, on young voters will continue to be researched and debated for many years. The shift, most scholars claim, has been momentous, from "the authoritative nightly news of an earlier era…[and] replaced by a variety of programming strategies ranging from the latest version of network 'news lite' to local news happy talk and 24-hour cable news punditry" (Baym 2). Researchers agree, "for better or worse, millions of voters make their decisions about candidates based on personal characteristics – the predominant emphasis of E-talk shows -- rather than public policy issues" (Baum 26). While "Hollander (1995) found that exposure to entertainment-based talk programs artificially inflated viewers' perceptions of their own political knowledge…[Baum] argues that soft news creates a more knowledgeable citizenry by educating an inattentive public that would not otherwise follow traditional hard news" (qtd. in Baumgartner and Morris 342). On the other hand, Baumgartner and Morris believe "negative perceptions of candidates could have participation implications by keeping more youth from the polls" (Baumgartner and Morris 362). More research on a wider range of soft news programming will be very interesting as will studies of how Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Tina Fey, and other

comedians played a role in the 2008 election. It will be interesting to see if Fey's portrayal of Sarah Palin swayed youth voters. Additionally, research is needed on whether soft news could be a point of motivating nonvoters. The current research I found failed to address this point.

8 Conclusion

       The millennial generation has approached politics differently than previous generations. Each election presents a new group of youth and first time voters that organizations are challenged to reach and mobilize. Every election includes voters having just reached adulthood, and in that sense significant shifts in attractive motivation might be researched for any generation. Fourteen year olds who witnessed the hanging chad debacle of 2000 could vote in the 2004 election. Each new election brings a new group, making the youth vote an ever-changing electorate. Making generalizations about youth voters should be done with caution. However, through my research, I reached a few conclusions that I believe apply to the current group of eighteen to twenty-nine year old voters.

       While the past plays a part in our culture's view of youth voters and sets expectations for them, it really only plays a minor role in helping us understand why youth do or do not vote. A nineteen year old isn't going to consider the fact that forty years ago he wouldn't have been able to vote although he could have been sent to war. He or she isn't going to look to the high voter turnout of the twentieth century as guidance. It's the current situation that will overdetermine this potential voter. Understanding and caring about the issues or wanting to see government run in the way he believes it should be will more likely motivate this youth. As much as academics like to look back, today's youth are more likely to look forward and wonder if the future is going to be better or not. Some just need to be shown that it can be through voting that youth can help make the future better for themselves and their families.

In addition, I found that education, television, and internet provide societal portals for reaching youth voters both before and once they can vote. Reaching youth while in secondary school can provide an excellent foundation for their future political involvement. Classes featuring participation and critical thinking have been suggested to work better in making longer lasting impressions on students. Debating issues with peers in open and supportive environments allows the whole class the opportunity to learn about the issues and themselves. When a student has to consider where she stands on an issue, she learns about herself, her values, and the role she sees government playing in her life.

However, having these kinds of discussions with seventeen and eighteen year olds in a civics course may be too late. I believe that political education should begin earlier, such as in middle school history courses. It should also be coming up at home around the dining room table. We can't depend on one class in a teen's senior year to be the only political education our youth receive. Since youth have to come to believe in and internalize the ethical and social power of the vote, early education is perhaps the most critical in providing tools for young voters.

In addition, the internet and television play important roles in reaching young voters on current issues. While civics courses lay the foundation with lessons on how a bill becomes a law, mass media bring the latest story on the legislative branch failing to come to an agreement on solving a major problem. Jon Stewart will crack a joke about a senator's speech that a young adult otherwise may not have ever heard of. A blogger might write a whole piece on a little known bill trying to make its way through subcommittee that greatly affects the life of a young adult. These portals can target youth

on issues in contemporary ways more likely to connect with them since they are interest driven. These media translate politics into a language that just might cause a young adult to consider further contemplation and research on the subject. While it may be expecting too much, I believe that the internet and late night comedy television shows offer some of the best ways of reaching youth voters. Instead of forcing them to change their habits in order to receive political news, reach them where they're at. Making the small effort to adapt to their preferred communication style is worth the ability to connect to youth.

However, there will always be adults who don't vote. I think that there are times when political scientists, political organizers, and others concerned with youth voting believe that if these portals work properly, they can motivate youth to vote, and there will be sunshine and rainbows. Unfortunately, that's not how things work. Youth voters are new at taking on all of this adult responsibility. Many don't care to learn about politics, don't see it affecting them, and no matter the money spent on trying to get them to vote, they won't. It's just a fact of life, and it's their personal choice. These adults are nonvoters. They may not vote in this election, but they may in the next. They choose not to vote for now.

In contrast, there are adults out there who are potential voters. These adults haven't chosen not to vote but haven't chosen to vote either. They haven't decided not to care about politics but aren't passionate about an issue yet. They are undecideds, not just about a candidate or issue, but also about voting itself. Youth in this group may vote, as opposed to those who won't vote. Political organizations and get-out-the-vote groups should target these youth when looking to reach new voters. Other youth who do already care about politics and already intend to vote don't need to be motivated or educated.

Undecideds may need a bit more handholding, one-on-one conversations about the issues, opportunities to meet the candidates, and time to get to know where they stand. It is this group, those whose political ideals are very much in formation, that I believe should be the focus of mobilization movements.

While mobilizing youth is a broad topic some researchers have covered, there could be more on how youth use education and media information to vote in order to motivate more youth to vote. One conclusion that I have drawn is that undecideds need more than just mass contact. While the internet and comedy television shows can pique interest in an issue, youth must do further research, have conversations with friends, debate with a professor, or reach out in some other way in order for them to gain additional understanding and meaning.

Throughout my research, I found that education (how we teach politics), the internet (how youth access additional information), and soft news (how current news is presented) are areas of direct political connection for young adults. What I didn't find was any connection between these areas and motivating youth to vote. It seems there needs to already be interest in politics before youth will seek out information on the internet or on television or use the skills learned in high school civics courses. There needs to be a base of appeal, which already seems to be happening in the media.

There must also be a one-on-one effort to influence youth to vote. I understand that this is not easy. It requires more than leaflets, television ads, or mass mailings. Since millennials are a generation of individuals, I believe they want politics presented on a personal level. It means more than petitioners on the sidewalk or phone bank calls during dinnertime. Individualized conversations about politics require one caring person to talk

to another about politics. It means sitting down, answering questions, and throwing some back to the other person. Research has found that door-to-door canvassing may be more effective than mass media advertising simply because of "its use of social psychology to motivate participation… [and] better…connect with the individuals they visit on a personal level than phone or mail GOTV [get-out-the-vote] strategies" (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 1). These conversations stimulate and engage, as opposed to television, which disengages an individual. It means turning off the television, a major distracter in our society, and listening to each other. It's not easy or mass marketing friendly, but that is the point. This is the challenge that I have taken up and that I pose to all who have taken the time to read this thesis. Talk and listen. Politics is only boring if you make it so.

While I hope for these things to happen, I have come to the conclusion that youth voting rates and political participation will not increase without one-on-one connections. For the Millennials, as with previous generations, it is likely that the lifecycle effect will kick in as Millennials age, and they will become politically active in their late thirties to early forties. One lesson from the 1960s generation is the stimulation of youth interest in politics with the election of a charismatic leader such as Kennedy that has already been seen in the recent election of Obama. I believe that these factors, along with the natural maturation of Millennials, will result in an increase in political participation among youth voters in the next decade.

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