

# Disrupting Filters To Deepen Students' Political Commitment

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## **Abstract:**

*For those concerned about the recent decreases seen in youth voter turnout in the U.S.—even after the heights reached in the 2008 presidential election, consideration of how liberal learning and civic engagement can connect is helpful. Many scholars note with dismay the vanishing voter, and especially the anemic rates of youth turnout. We argue that reconsidering how we teach and approach student learning has implications for sustaining youth commitment and deepening democratic engagement.*

## **Key Words:**

voter turnout; commitment; youth; democratic engagement.

## **Introduction**

It is both common and appropriate to use levels of electoral engagement as a means to assess the health of democratic systems. Competitive races, high turnout, and so on are markers of robust civic institutions. Yet, democratic governance requires more than preference aggregation; it demands commitment to principles of citizenship and responsibility. When engagement is low, we understand that one of the necessary conditions of democratic governance is imperiled. We also know that when a particular group of citizens turns from the political process, the character of the system distorted, to the detriment of disengaged groups and the larger body politic.

That is why meager levels of political engagement among young Americans at the end of the 20th century were, for some, unsettling. In the 2000 presidential election, for example, turnout for those under 30 had dipped to just 35 percent. Warning of the consequences of this trend, Derek Bok (2001), former president of Harvard University, suggested "Democracy is a collective venture that falters or flourishes depending on the

efforts citizens invest in its behalf” (420). A decade earlier, Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne, Jr. (1991) commented that “a nation that hates politics will not long thrive as a democracy” (335).

The response to this decline was equally swift and comprehensive. The number of youth-centered political mobilization efforts that either took root or dramatically expanded by 2004 was truly impressive. And while a direct causal connection to these efforts would be difficult to verify, it is clear that interest among young citizens swelled in the 2004 and 2008 elections. By the 2008 election turnout for those under 30 rose to 51 percent. Many other indicators of political behavior, such as participating in campaign events, talking about politics with friends and family, and paying attention to the news also suggested greater youth interest between 2000 and 2008. Given the role that young voters played in several of the early presidential nomination contests, it seemed to make sense that *Time* would dub 2008 the “Year of the Youth Vote” (Jan. 31, 2008). It seemed that young citizens had rediscovered the potential of politics and they were once again making their voices heard.

New data, however, suggest the “reemergence” of young voters was likely a temporary surge. The first indicators of this were the 2009 gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia. Exit polling found that voters under age 30 accounted for just 9 percent of voters in New Jersey (compared with 17 percent in 2008) and 10 percent in Virginia (down from 21 percent in 2008) (Barone, 2009). According to a veteran observer of electoral politics, “A drop-off in young turnout is normal in off-year elections. But this drop-off was enormous” (Barone, 2009). The youth also stayed home during the critically important special election to fill the Massachusetts Senate seat vacated by the death of Ted Kennedy. In that race, turnout for those older than 30 was nearly 60 percent, but for younger voters it was a scant 15 percent (CIRCLE, Jan. 10, 2010).

By the 2010 midterm election it appeared quite clear that the youth engagement bubble had burst. Turnout for those under 30 reached just 22.8 percent, slightly less than in 2006, the previous midterm election (CIRCLE, Nov. 17, 2010; Wattenberg, 2012). That just one in five young Americans would come to the polls in 2010 would seem especially meager given the salience of many issues for young voters, and given that turnout for all voters actually increased in 2010 to 41 percent. This implies that the gap between young and older voters is actually growing. Moreover, coming off the heels of the “Year of the Youth Vote,” the drop in engagement seems to run against a long line of scholarship that suggests once begun, voting becomes habitual. As noted by scholar Martin Wattenberg, in his book *Is Voting for Young People?*, “[I]t is hard to see how their turnout rates will catch up to that of their elders unless something is done” (2012, 190).

So what happened? One possibility might be that our expectations were set too high. Perhaps younger voters are inclined to pay more attention to high profile contests—that is, the presidential contests, particularly with exciting candidates like Barack Obama. Midterm election, off-year gubernatorial contests, specials elections and the like are simply off their radar, and always have been.

A second possibility might be that since “change” was a central theme in 2008, the slow, incremental pace of policy adjustments since then might deter sustained

participation. As ideological polarization (and party cohesion) increases, activists' reformist goals are often thwarted in favor of incremental policy proposals. If the discrete acts of political engagement by new voters do not generate meaningful policy shifts, one might imagine that the likelihood of further engagement decreases. We might also speculate that the ever-sharper tone of politics in the past few years may have pushed young Americans from politics. Angry protestors at town hall meetings, death threats toward members of Congress, rabid participants to call-in radio shows, vituperations in the blogosphere and outbursts on the floor of the House may seem so different, so disturbing as to turn new voters off.

Each of these explanations may contribute to the lackluster levels of political engagement in young citizens, but none captures the whole story. Something else might be at the core—something a bit more fundamental that connects many of these themes. In short, there may be an unwillingness on the part of young citizens to deepen their commitments, to participate beyond an election cycle, and to open themselves to criticism and opportunities for failure. The search for a solution may implicate how we teach.

In a recent *New Yorker* article, Malcolm Gladwell (2010) made an analogous argument regarding the relationship between social networking sites and democratic engagement. Contrary to the hopes of the “evangelists of social media,” he suggested new modes of communication have *not* drawn young citizens into the political fray in significant ways. He wrote, “[s]ocial networks are effective at increasing participation—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires.” For example, the Save Darfur Coalition Facebook page boasts some 1,282,339 members, but the average donation is just nine cents. People surely care about what has happened in Darfur, but little is expected of them beyond linking to the site. Social media are designed to allow access to information, he argued, but do little to forge connections to other political actors or to the larger political system. “It makes it easier for activist to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have an impact.”

Donald W. Harward, *President Emeritus* of Bates College and Director of the *Bringing Theory to Practice Project*, picked up on that theme, suggesting that at the heart of truncated, episodic youth civic engagement is an important distinction between “horizontal” and “vertical” behaviors (Harward, 2012, p. 27). It may be helpful to consider the axes as reflecting divergent ways of thinking about “change.” Registering to vote, heading to the polls, signing on a candidate’s Facebook page and tweeting about a policy dispute are horizontal modes of engagement. They broaden involvement, but in limited ways and for a short period of time. For each of these behaviors require a modest level of commitment, little risk is involved and scant reflection is required. The significance of that involvement for future choices and actions are also rarely explored. As such, there are no regrets or sense of irony in turning out to help elect a president with an agenda of change, but not joining the fray to defend his top policy priorities or in coming back to the polls two years later to help keep members of his party in the majority in Congress.

Horizontal, “drive-by” participation is risk averse, insulating us from dismay and at the same time limiting the resources we must bring to bear to create change. We get the t-shirt or the bumper sticker that conveys our sensibilities without deepening our

commitment in a way that involves risking our resources (time, reputation, or well-being, for example).

Vertical participation entails a deeper understanding of the obligations and opportunities for substantial, prolonged engagement to alter the course of government. It builds upon the cultivation of information by calling upon the participant to apply information in strategic ways, and by merging with like-minded citizens in concerted, specific activities. It necessarily entails both commitment and risk. A willingness to engage vertically invites a level of risk to which many young persons are unaccustomed. A deeper commitment may lead to deeper dismay when things don't work out. Like the tide, the higher it rises, the further it ebbs. But how might colleges and universities provide avenues for deeper forms of engagement?

There is an important connection between the broad-scale voter turnout and young voters' disinclination to engage policy disputes. "Flattened," "thin," or "horizontal" patterns of political engagement reward participants (and campaigns) in limited, immediate ways. Discrete acts of political engagement, like voting or signing petitions, are generally more attractive to new voters because they are less risky activities than sustained, large-scale commitments. In this sense, passing involvement with political phenomena is consistent with college students' passing engagement with ideas. The connection between patterns of political disengagement and intellectual risk aversion are not coincidental.

An emphasis on "deep," or "vertical" patterns of engagement and learning challenges not only the canonical view of higher education and pedagogy, but also demands more of citizens in a democratic society (Harvard & Shea, 2012). At its best, higher education is about intellectual emancipation. Our colleges and universities must encourage students to extend themselves, deepen commitments to important ideas, become self-reliant, and take responsibility for knowing. But to do this, students and faculty must overcome a deep, understandable, aversion to risk. A principal means by which our students engage ideas (outside our classroom) may provide an obstacle to encouraging intellectual risk-acceptance.

The ability of risk averse students to predetermine the sort information to which they are exposed runs counter to our teaching objectives and the learning goals for our students. The ability to (perfectly) filter information through the self-selection among the multiplicity of social media (e.g., blogs, Twitter, issue or ideologically uni-dimensional websites) is worth exploring if we're interested in heightening opportunities for deliberation, reflection, critical analysis, and civic attentiveness.

Certainly, a goal of an undergraduate education of quality should provide a context whereby students are exposed to approaches, techniques, literatures, practitioners, ideas, opportunities, and so on that serve to further democratic reflection and debate. It is ultimately an approach that values the "cosmopolitanization" of converged media and social networks, rather than the parochialism of the "Daily Me" (see, e.g., Sunstein, 2009) that's all too often the consequence of students' ability to filter their on-line world.

An approach to undergraduate education that disrupts filters exposes students to topics, situations, ideas, and consequences that they might not have anticipated. As it broadens exposure to new ideas, it invites students to deepen their commitment to

ideas and their correlates. Emphasis is placed on in-depth consideration of the multiple approaches to substantive questions of principle and policy, rather than filtering the “thin” outputs of an “ideological vending machine.” Finally, as filters are disrupted, common experiences emerge that help define a community, provide a common touchstone for mutual reflection and debate, and deepen commitments among participants (Sunstein, 2009).

With filtering, we are assured to never have to confront the other. When those individual behaviors are universalized, balkanization is the result. As a consequence of individual preference and the technological ability to filter our world, we have what economists call “negative externalities”—poor educational experiences, the absence of improvements in policy, heightened incivility, a lack of progress, and so on (Sunstein, 2009). The “well” of arguments to which we risk exposure has run dry and we only confront what we’ve presupposed.

Dry wells might not be problematic if one views a degree as a “chit” to be pursued in the interest of financial security. Ambiguity, subtlety, curiosity, and responsibility, for example, may not be deeply valued or appreciated in such a perspective. However, this thin (and unfortunately prevailing) view of higher education reflects a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the relationship between the knower and the known. The myth of objectivity holds the objects of our knowing at arm’s length and thereby serves our risk aversion well. It allows us to keep the other “out there,” limiting its ability to make a claim on us. It reduces risk by not displacing our preconceptions, by not challenging our assumptions, nor implicating our way of behaving. Rather, what we encounter thinly tends to “fit” our sense of what we had anticipated. Our views are secure from challenge by the “other.” As Parker Palmer writes, “[i]n the popular imagination, knowing is seen as the act of a solitary individual...” but “scholars now understand that knowing is a profoundly communal act. Nothing could possibly be known by the solitary self, since the self is inherently communal in nature.” (1993, xv) So long as classes, assignments, or other significant experiences our students have reflect the myth of objectivity, we limit the likelihood of deepening engagement of all kinds.

Disrupting filters, then, serves a civic mission of higher education, and fosters deliberation about consequential ideas. In thinking more holistically about the experience of students beyond our classrooms, we have an opportunity to emphasize patterns of student engagement and learning that challenge and deepen students’ expectations of higher education and civic engagement. Such a reconceptualization of the purpose of higher education demands a great deal more from both faculty and students than a model of higher education that is premised upon the notion of “information transfer.” It requires that students accept a level of risk that involves exposure to criticism and the rejection of fundamental assumptions that run counter to new evidence and new arguments.

The same holds true for political engagement. The greater the commitment, the greater the exposure to criticism and risk. Movement from an episodic form of political engagement to sustained forms of engagement—like the movement from a passive view of student learning to a “deepened” view of the obligation of learners—is a critically important goal for us to explore. As teachers we must disrupt filters, remove students

from the familiar, force engagement with “otherness,” and provide the contexts where students can deepen their engagement with ideas and their consequences. This is education's emancipatory value, and a principle that would go a long way toward encouraging patterns of political behavior that sustain and deepen youth commitment—and by doing so buttress the foundation of our democracy.

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