

Youth Indifference in American Politics: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions

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1 Introduction

It's been a common trend throughout American history for young Americans to be less involved than their older counterparts in political issues. In recent decades however, this gap in the participation of younger Americans relative to old has noticeably increased. In polls taken during the 1990s, American's aged 18-29 were more than 20% less likely to look forward to reading a newspaper, or watching news media than those above 30. Data from the 2010 census shows that American's between 18-29 make up nearly 30% of the total American population, so this data suggests that nearly a third of American citizens show signs of disinterest in political affairs. [2]

If we accept that civil engagement of citizens is a fundamental necessity for the functioning of our democratic system, this is a disturbing trend indeed. The purpose of this paper is threefold: First, I establish some of the most important reasons that indifference to political issues is becoming more widespread among young Americans. Next, I argue that if left unchecked, this trend could have serious consequences for Americas' future. Finally, I offer some steps that can be taken now to help to reverse

this trend and avert these consequences. [5]

2 Why Indifference?

2.1 Lack of impact on outcome of political processes

There are numerous reasons why a young American might refrain from taking an active interest in following the political events surrounding him. The first of these stems from the perceived scale of the political landscape itself. Many young Americans feel that their individual contribution to the outcome of political processes is negligible, and this can cause them to refrain from participating in it at all. Often young people believe that political decisions are simply made by older politicians, and regardless of what they do, the outcome will be the same anyways. This feeling of inevitability is common particularly among Americans who are just coming into adulthood and trying to find their place in the world. “My actions have no impact, so why do anything?” is unfortunately a surprisingly feeling among young voters.

2.2 Distrust of the Political Process

In addition to being intimidated by the scale on which political decisions are made, many young Americans are dissuaded from participating in politics by a distrust in the integrity of the process itself. In interviews conducted of a sample of American college students, there was an overwhelming amount of cynicism regarding the character and motivations of politicians. Politicians were often perceived by the interviewees as “dishonest”, “corrupt”, “insincere”, or “self-serving”. This is an far stronger motivation to refrain from participating in the political process than the previous example of size. If someone doesn’t have faith that the political outcomes are determined fairly by the majority will of the people, they have even less incentive to be engaged in the process

than someone who is deterred by the scale of the system alone. They might feel that not only is their individual vote insignificant, but that even if that manage to gather a sizeable number of supporters, political outcomes could still be unchanged. [3]

2.3 Lack of Partisanship

Another factor that contributes to the young population of America's lack of participation in political issues is that of partisanship. Results of polls consistently show a positive correlation between strong attachment to a political party and general political involvement. People with strong partisan views will naturally have stronger preferences for particular policies and politicians and thus will be more likely to vote and keep up with current events. Surveys conducted in the late 1990s found that only 21% of Americans under 30 considered themselves strong partisans versus 46% for Americans above 30. Older Americans are much more likely to have strong partisan views than young Americans. This makes sense - younger Americans simply have had less time to develop rigid opinions about the world around them and align themselves with particular causes or parties. [2]

2.4 Ineffective Media Reach to Youth

I would argue that this final reason for youth apathy toward politics is one of the most important, but it is also the one most easily remedied. It's impossible to ignore the huge difference in the amount that younger Americans follow news media compared to their older counterparts. Polls show that while 76% of Americans over age 30 reported reading a newspaper the day before they were polled, only 31% of those below age 30 had. Similarly, in the same poll, 86% of the over-30 group reported watching a TV news show the day before they were interviewed, compared with only 45% of those under 30. [4] [1]

We must accept the possibility that current primary methods of communicating current events in politics - namely news TV and paper newspapers - are simply ineffectively doing the job when it comes to the younger contingent of voting aged Americans. One psychological explanation for this is that children growing up typically associate reading newspapers and watching the news as something their parents do - something boring for “old people”. Even as children come into adulthood and reach the age where they themselves should be voting, this association often remains, causing them to avoid these activities and thus remained uninformed about current events. Later, I will argue that the rise of the internet as a medium for communication gives us a unique opportunity to reach younger audiences without this attached stigma. First however, I will discuss the “why” of doing this, by examining some potential consequences of leaving this trend to continue unchecked. [4] [1]

3 Consequences of Youth Indifference

On a basic level, the consequences of young Americans’ indifference to public affairs all stem from an assumption that participation in the political system is a fundamental requirement for being a responsible citizen in a democratic society. Brady, Schlozman, Verba convincingly argue the validity of this assumption in a paper titled “Civic Participation and the Equality Problem”. In this paper, the authors point out that political inactivity is not uniformly distributed across the population. In fact, it is quite the opposite as we have already seen here in regard to age. In their paper, they focus on imbalances in political participation between social classes. They point out the fact that Americans who are less financially well off are less likely to be politically involved. This means that this broad section of the population is under-represented, and their viewpoints and concerns are likely to receive less attention and representation than is

warranted. This is in direct opposition to one of the fundamental tenets of democratic society - namely that the needs and preferences of all citizens should be equally represented in government. [5]

3.1 Under-representation of Youth Needs

I would argue that this analysis applies equally to the case of age-bias in political involvement. In the same way as above, a tendency for political indifference in young voters inadvertently causes their needs and preferences to be under-represented in government. There are many policy decisions which have significantly more impact on the younger citizens than on those who are middle aged and above. Examples of these include healthcare, social security, and the environment. Over a third of Americans are under age 30 and have an enormous stake in these types of issues, yet the abstaining from civic engagement causes their concerns and needs relating to these issues to be under-emphasized. [5]

3.2 Impact on Personal Development

A second argument made for the importance of civic participation in the Brady paper concerns the development of the individual, rather than the representation of the groups needs. The Brady paper argues that civic engagement is paramount in developing many of the desirable characteristics we associate with responsible citizens. Among them are independence, critical thought, respect for others, and a willingness to take on responsibility. This is of particular concern when applied to the case of younger Americans. These younger Americans are the future leaders of the country! If it is indeed true that participation in ones civic duties are a critical part of learning to become a respectable adult, then we simply cannot afford to have our youth be uninvolved. Of course you might say that it is natural for younger people to be less interested in politics and that

they will “grow into” their roles as responsible citizens with time. I would argue that this is not a chance we can afford to take. Amidst a long term trend of increasing indifference, cannot simply sit back and hope that young Americans’ will “come around” in time to lead the country when there are steps we can take now to combat this trend. [5]

4 Remedies

I propose two changes that I feel will help to increase youth interest in American political affairs. Of the causes presented in section 1, I feel that the ineffective use of the media as a communication medium to young voters is the most tangible, and easiest to address, so I will focus my attention on that issue. The first change addresses the stigma associated with the news as something that young people shouldn’t be interested in. The second change relates to how to more effectively use the internet as a communication medium to get political news to young America.

4.1 De-Stigmatizing the News

As described in section two, young people often carry the belief that watching television news or reading newspapers is something for “old people” to do. This belief is a result of growing up seeing their parents watch the news every night and likely being bored by it. This is understandable, as the main news programs primarily target adults and aren’t designed to hold the attention of younger children. But what if there were television news shows and newspapers written specifically to interest younger viewers? In fact, these types of shows do exist, but they aren’t particularly widespread. For television shows, Nick News and Channel One News are the most popular examples. For print media, there aren’t any notable national newspapers specifically targeting a youth audience. I believe that developing more TV news programs and newspapers with language and

topics crafted to be of interest to younger audiences would do a lot to engage youth in politics. [3]

4.2 Making Better Use of the Internet

Only in the past decade has internet use become widespread enough to warrant use as a platform to communicate political information. As early as the beginning of the decade, we saw the first websites dedicated to the campaigns of political candidates. Today, the majority of candidates running for public office have websites for their campaigns, but they are not as effective as they could be in bringing in younger voters. Candidates need to make an effort to keep their websites up to date with the current standards. Regardless of how basic the website may be, no one wants to spend much time on a site that looks like it was built ten years ago, particularly young people. In interviews conducted with a variety of high school and college students, many of them had harsh criticisms for campaign websites of political candidates. Complaints included difficulty of usability, awkward navigation, and opaqueness with regard to what was being done with data collected from the site. In short, most political campaign websites simply weren't as modern and slick as sites the younger generation has become accustomed to. Interviewees also said that they expected the sites to have some kind of privacy policy detailing the ways in which information collected would be used to further the campaigns goals. [1]

5 Conclusion

We have seen a broad overview of the topic of political indifference among young Americans. Although some of the causes for this indifference discussed earlier are out of our immediate control, many aren't. Given the importance of having a politically active

population, we need to take steps as a nation to address this problem and reengage the younger voters of America. Not only are the young the future leaders of the America, they are also the demographic that - when politically informed - is most likely to get up and take action now. We need to do something to re-involve American youth in politics, and I believe the two suggestions outlined here are a good place to start. Political apathy among the young is not a sentiment we can afford to spread.

References

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