

Tocqueville Revisited -- Participation in America in the Twenty-first Century¹

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In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville stated that a participatory public was a defining feature of American politics and a basic strength of the political system. This theme was largely repeated over the next century of writings on political participation.

However, recent scholarship often argues that this description no longer applies. Although education levels, socioeconomic status, access to political information, and the other resources of democratic citizenship have increased substantially, this has apparently not stimulated participation. In his influential book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam concluded: “declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life. Like a fever, electoral abstention is even more important as a sign of deeper trouble in the body politic than as a malady itself. It is not just from the voting booth that Americans are increasingly AWOL.”¹ Other studies endorse Putnam’s assessment, and emphasize the need for reforms to address this crisis.²

At the same time, another group of scholars takes the opposite position. Ronald Inglehart offers a much more optimistic image of citizen engagement: “One frequently hears references to growing apathy on the part of the public . . . These allegations of apathy are misleading: mass publics *are* deserting the old-line, oligarchical political organizations that mobilized them in the modernization era—but they are becoming more active in a wide range of elite-challenging forms of political action.”³ Political consumerism, contentious activity, deliberative action, and online participation have all increased since the halcyon days of the early 1960s. From this perspective, America is potentially witnessing a renaissance of democratic engagement—rather than a general decline in participation.⁴

Citizen participation is “at the heart of democratic theory and at the heart of the democratic political formula in the United States.”⁵ Yet there is a surprising unevenness to the

1 This has been a fully collaborative work between myself and Sidney Verba. We jointly submitted a proposal to the General Social Survey to replicate the Verba/Nie trend questions on the 2014 GSS under their program for module proposals. Sid’s contributions guided this essay and I am in his debt; I consider him an unnamed coauthor who did everything except write the prose.

long-term evidence on American participation patterns, and how these may have changed in recent decades. Too often pollsters have altered the wording of questions across surveys, varied the question format, or even the surveying methods. Different projects examine different forms of participation, such as protest in one project or campaign activity in another. High quality, longitudinal, nationally representative survey data are surprisingly rare. Like the proverbial blind people and the elephant, we see bits of evidence but not the whole picture. In short, we lack rigorous comprehensive data on Americans' political participation over time.

This essay presents new evidence to address this debate. Sidney Verba and I proposed a participation module for the 2014 General Social Survey (GSS). This survey replicated items from Sidney Verba and Norman Nie's seminal *Participation in America* survey done in 1967, which was repeated in 1987. These are only three data points, but the evidence from these surveys is buttressed by the other leading academic surveys of Americans' political behavior.

We think the results are so potentially important to the public debate about the vitality of American democracy that we want to share our preliminary findings, with more detailed analyses to follow in other publications.

Participation over Time

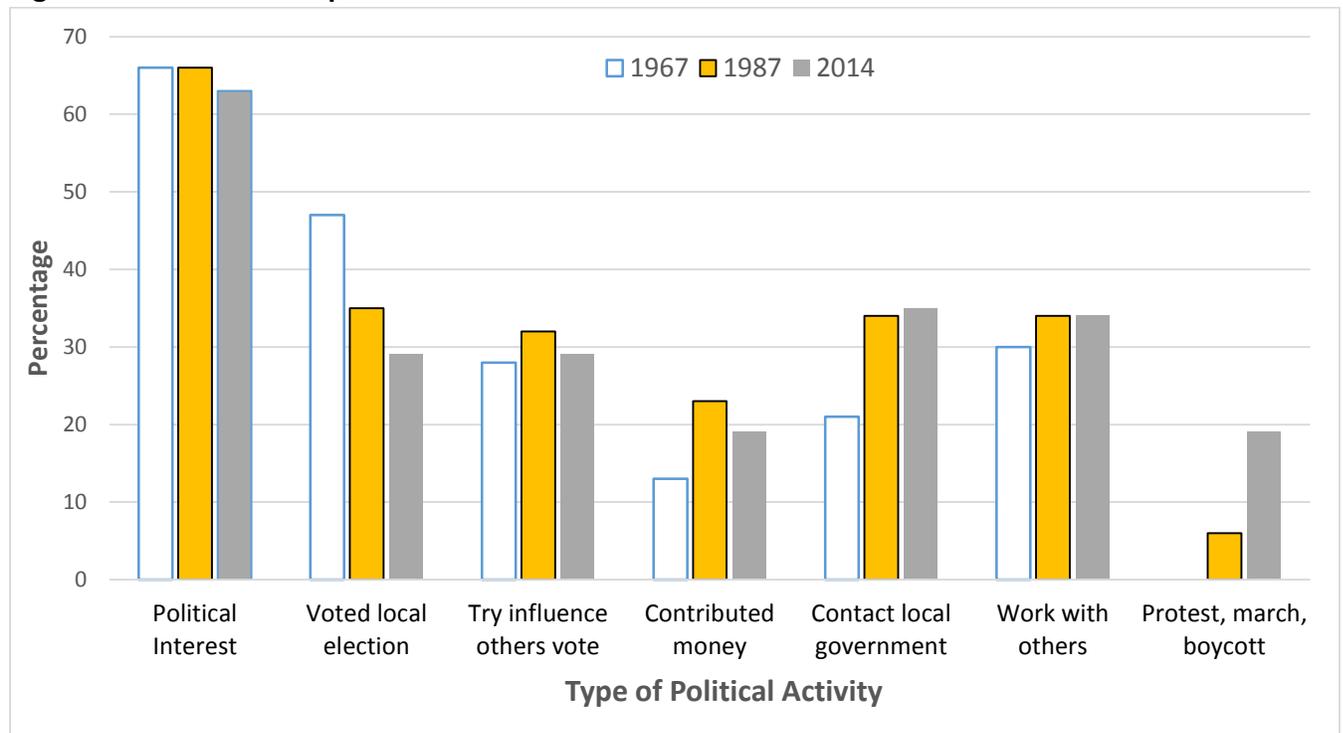
Participation in America introduced the idea that participation patterns can be grouped into several modes of political action: voting, campaign activity, communal (informal group) activity, and contacting.⁶ Then came the turbulent decade of the 1960s, and participation expanded to include protest and other forms of contentious activity. These five modes of participation guided the new data collection.

The 1987 replication found that most forms of political activity had increased since 1967, with the exception of voting and electoral activity.⁷ This alone was surprising, since the 1967 survey was taken in the midst of one of the most turbulent decades in modern American history with the nation politicized by the civil rights struggles, the escalating Vietnam War, and counter-culture movements. And other research claimed that activity had significantly declined over this same time span.⁸

We proposed a replication of several items from the 1967 and 1987 surveys to capture the four modes of action, plus the new protest question asked in 1988. Because interview time is very limited, the GSS was able to include seven items, which still span the five modes of political activity.⁹ All three surveys were conducted as in-person, nationally representative samples, and fieldwork was done by the NORC to minimize house effects.

Figure 1 presents the trends in these participation measures—from the supposedly engaged 1960s to the supposedly disengaged 2010s. As other studies have shown, Americans have become less likely to vote; the percentage who said they always vote in local elections drops from 47 percent in 1967 to 29 percent in 2014.¹⁰ At the same time, the percentage who tried to convince others how to vote has held steady over time, and the percentage who gave money to a party or political cause has increased since 1967.

Figure 1. Political Participation in America



Source: Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, pg. 72) and 2014 General Social Survey Panel.

Moreover, the other forms of action have been stable or increased over time. The percentage who report having contacted the local government over a policy matter has increased by nearly half since 1967. Working with others in the community on a local problem

epitomizes Tocqueville's view of grassroots democracy. This is up slightly since 1967. And not unexpectedly, the percentage of Americans who say they have participated in a protest, a demonstration or other contentious form of action has increased dramatically (although the wording of this question changed). And the broadest measure of political engagement—general interest in politics—shows no significant change over these four decades.

These are only three surveys, but there is substantial confirmation of each specific point from the major academic survey series.¹¹ The American National Election Study (ANES) finds a significant increase in voter persuasion over its six decades of surveys, and financial contributions to parties and political causes have increased. The World Values Survey (WVS) documents a similar upward trend in several contentious political activities from its baseline in 1975 until the most recent survey in 2011. The ANES also finds a slight increase in general political interest since the early 1960s.¹² Similarly, the 2000 Social Capital Survey replicated four questions from the Verba/Nie participation series: interest, attending a rally, working with a community group, and protest. None of these items displayed a significant decrease from Verba/Nie's initial results even though the timeframe was reduced to activity in the past year.¹³

The trends in the *Participation in America* measures are only half the story. New forms of political action are expanding the boundaries of political action. The Internet was obviously not part of the classic studies of participation pre-2000, but it is now being used by millions for political activities. The Pew Center surveyed Americans about their participation in mid-2012.¹⁴ The intriguing part of this survey is that it separately asked about traditional offline forms of political participation and parallel activity online. For example, 25 percent of Americans had signed a petition (offline or both offline and online) in the previous 12 months, but an additional 8 percent had only signed an online petition. Similarly, 24 percent had contacted a politician by phone or mail (or also by email), but an additional 6 percent had only contacted by email. The same study found that two-fifths of internet users took part in some political activity as part of a social networking site.¹⁵ Some of this online-only activity is because it is easier, so it substitutes for offline actions. But undoubtedly this new medium opens the door to participation by individuals who might not otherwise be active, such as young people.

Another change is the spread of political consumerism, that is, buying or not buying a product for ethical, moral or political reasons. People are increasingly using their economic power to shape policies on labor practices, environmental protection, animal rights and a host of other causes.¹⁶ The 2014 GSS found that about a quarter of Americans say they done political consumerism in the past 12 months. Volunteering for social causes also has increased over time, especially among younger Americans.¹⁷ New creative and individualized modes of participation such as street parties, guerrilla gardening and swarming utilize non-political activities for political purposes.¹⁸

In short, America is actually experiencing an expansion in political participation. The evidence of declining turnout is ubiquitous at the national, state and local levels—and widely discussed after each election. There are very important reasons to be concerned with the decline in voting turnout, and the public should be more engaged in the electoral process. But a focus on lower voter participation can blind us to the larger picture that other forms of political action are increasing, and new forms of activity are further expanding the repertoire of action. If one includes newer forms of action, such as online activity and political consumerism, the growth in political activity has been even larger. The new data from the 2014 GSS just connect the dots that are available from separate studies of various modes of action.

Generations and Political Participation

A central theme in the participation decline literature is the role of generational change. Most critical analysts view young Americans as a primary source of this decline. Authors from Tom Brokaw to Robert Putnam extol the civic values and engagement of the older, ‘greatest generation’ of Americans with great hyperbole. These arguments have generated considerable research and policy attention on ways to involve youth into the political process. In contrast, other evidence points to increases in non-electoral forms of political action among the young.¹⁹

We use the new data series to track generational participation patterns over time. To simplify this presentation, we focus on four participation modes: voting, campaign activity (trying to influence others’ vote), contacting a government official, and working with a community group. Since these data span such a long time span, we can compare the

participation patterns of the pre-World War I generation to the Millennial Generation. Generations are defined as *the period when individuals reached adulthood* (not when they were born).²⁰ We can also look for evidence of life cycle effects by comparing how generations change across waves of these surveys.

The top left panel of Figure 2 describes voting in local elections, which is a rigorous measure of electoral participation since fewer people vote in these elections. The figure shows the familiar age (life cycle) gradient in participation in presidential elections.²¹ In 1967 the World War I generation voted 16 percent more than the youngest generation of post-WWII boomers. This generation gap increased to 27 percent in the 1987 survey, and 53 percent in 2014. This widening gap occurs because younger generations in 1987 and 2014 begin their voting experience at a lower base level. In 2014 only 5 percent of Millennials said they vote regularly in local elections! So much for democratic participation.

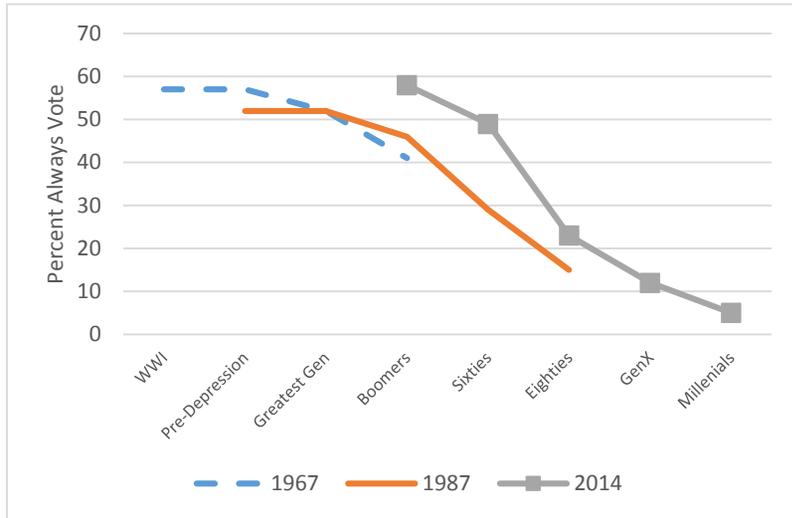
Fewer of us are voting, and each succeeding younger generation generally votes less than its predecessor. The life cycle pattern of increasing turnout with age may partially counteract the lower baseline voting of the young. Among the three generations represented in the 1987 and 2014 surveys, the reported voting in local elections increased 16 percent over this 27 year period. But it is unclear whether the Millennial generation can ever catch up to earlier generations because voting is a habit they are not learning at an early age.

If we stopped here, the data would endorse the general pessimism about participation in America. However, the new GSS data allows us to move beyond electoral turnout to examine other forms of action. The lower left panel of Figure 2 summarizes generational patterns in trying to influence others how to vote. This activity shows similar evidence of generational decline, albeit smaller than for voting. Campaign involvement also changes only slightly across the life cycle when compared to voting. The erosion of election turnout among younger generations today presumably lessens the motivation to convince others how to vote as well.

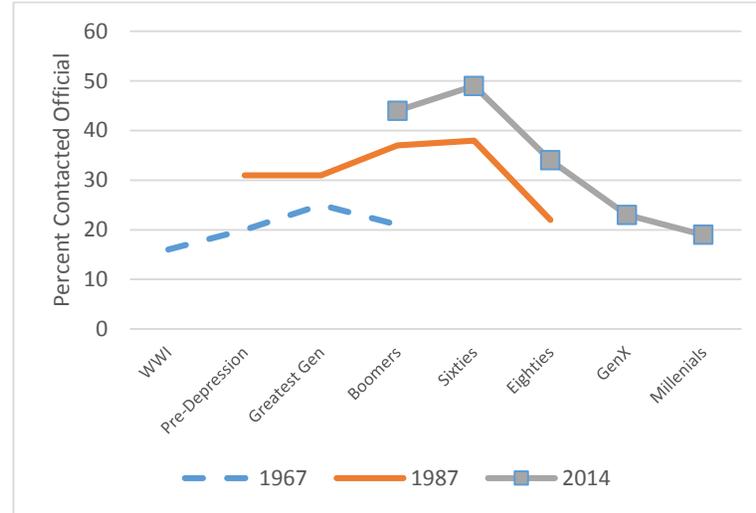
Contacting political officials is a third participation mode. To an extent, this activity can overlap with electoral politics, since state and national officials are selected in partisan elections and serve as partisan representatives. Citizens who dislike partisan politicians at election time may not be enamored with them after they win office—and act like partisans.

Figure 2. Generational Patterns in Political Participation

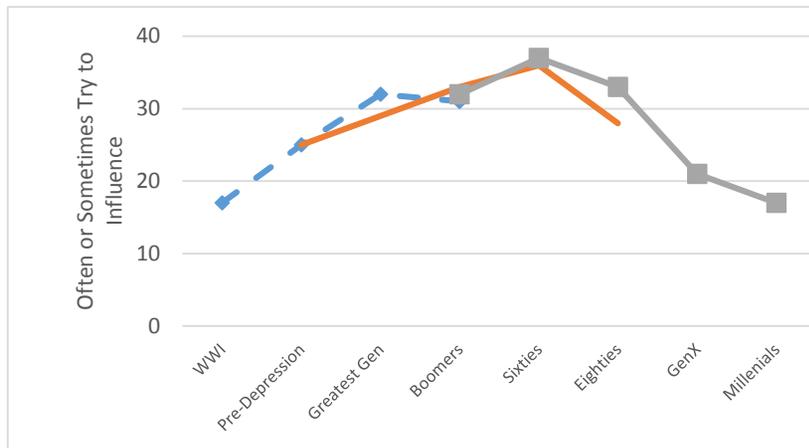
Vote in Local Elections



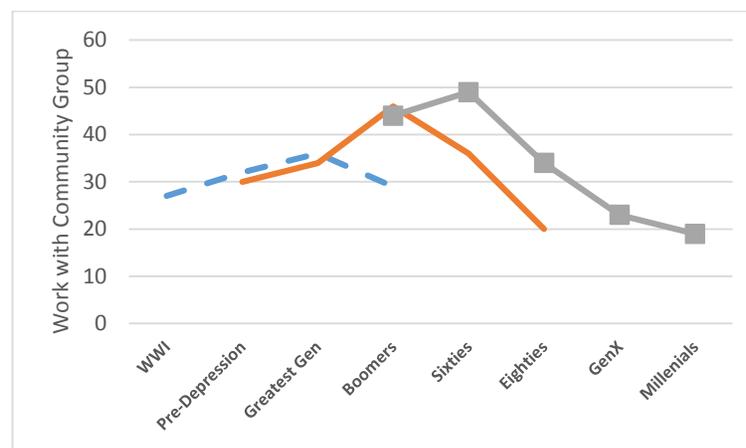
Contact Local Official



Try to Influence Others' Vote



Work with Community Group



Source: 1967 Verba/Nie Study; 1987 Verba/Scholzman/Brady Study; 2014 General Social Survey.

Note: The lines are percent active on each participation item.

To lessen this overlap, the survey asked about contact with local officials who are typically non-partisan offices.

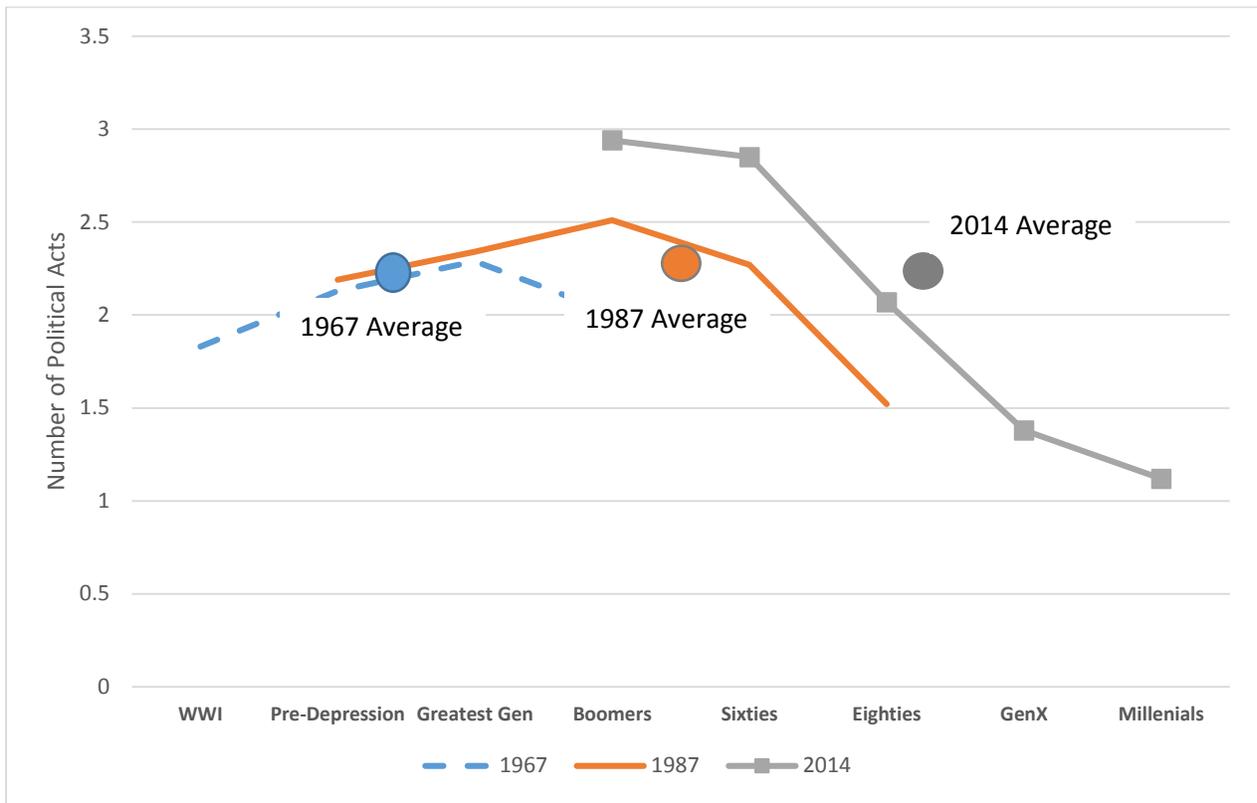
There has not been a generational dropoff in local contacting across time (top right panel of Figure 2). Younger people today are about as likely as those in 1967 or 1987 to contact local officials. And among postwar generations, this activity increases during the life cycle of citizenship. All three generations that overlap in the 1987-2014 surveys are more likely to contact when they are twenty-seven years older in the later survey. In short, Americans today are more likely to contact local officials and there is little evidence of a generational decline.

Finally, community activity shows a pattern similar to local contacting. The youngest generations in 1987 and 2014 start with comparable levels of activity, which appears to increase over the life cycle until dipping in one's senior years. In contrast, participation levels are essentially flat across the generations represented in the 1967 with little evidence of life cycle growth in activism.

The other three examples of political engagement follow slightly different patterns (data in appendix). For instance, political interest varies little over time or across generations—which again suggests that the young today are not distinctly less concerned about politics, but just engaged in different ways. Donating money follows the generational pattern of trying to influence others' vote, although there is an increase in the percentage who donate funds over time. We do not analyze protest patterns because the data are for only two time points, and the difference in question wordings limits direct comparison. However, analyses of WVS data from 1975-2011 indicate a growth in protest activity.²²

To summarize results, we constructed an overall participation index based on the six items available in all three surveys. This index paints a more complete picture of how participation has been changing (Figure 3). The three circles in the figure represent Americans' average number of activities at each time point. The situation is nowhere near as dire as some claim. Overall activity average 2.03 items in 1967, and it is 2.08 in 2014. If one were to add protest, boycotting and other new offline and online forms of political activity, it is clear that Americans participate significantly more today than they did in the mid-1960s (mean=2.27 adding the protest item from figure 1).

Figure 3. Generational Differences in Overall Activism



Source: 1967 Verba/Nie Study; 1987 Verba/Scholzman/Brady Study; 2014 General Social Survey.

Note: The lines are generational mean scores on the overall index of participation. The circles represent the average number of items for respondents at each timepoint.

At the same time, age differences are widening over time, at both ends of the life cycle. Younger Americans in 1987 and again in 2014 drop in their initial level of political participation. But the majority of this decline is because of voting less. At the other end of the age spectrum, older Americans in both of these years are significantly more active than their comparable age group in 1967, even allowing for the decrease in voting turnout. One interpretation is that older Americans are doing better, and younger Americans worse, than they did in the past—so the average is unchanged.²³

Another interpretation is that life cycle effects are becoming more important to participation today. On the one hand, a growing number of better-educated, more affluent, and healthier seniors with greater politically-relevant skills remain socially and politically engaged into later in life—much more so than in 1967.²⁴ So political life does end at sixty-five, but

actually continues to expand. On the other hand, an increasing percentage of young people are delaying the normal process of career, marriage and children, which also delays political involvement. The higher mobility of young today also slows their engagement in political life, and their disenchantment with partisan politics is a further impediment. Yet, it is significant to note that the youngest generation in 1987, which was a focal point in earlier critiques about freckles youth, raises above the average level of 1967 participation by the 2014 survey—a life cycle increase followed by all three of the generations across these two surveys. Will Millennials follow this same course with the passage of time? In short, the growing generation gap need not signal the erosion of participation among a younger generation, but the emergence of stronger life cycle variation on participation.

Participation and American Democracy Today

It is right for political scientists, policy experts and government officials to worry about any signs of growing disengagement by Americans. The erosion in turnout and electoral participation at the national, state and local levels has raised this alarm. And this is where the critics' eyes have focused.

But the 2014 General Social Survey provides a more complex image of how participation is changing. While participation in elections has decreased, people are now engaged in a wider variety of political activities, which expands political engagement overall.

We see three major lessons from these findings. First, we should not dismiss the decrease in voting turnout found here and in other studies. Elections are important because they select political elites, provide a source of democratic legitimacy, and engage citizens in the democratic process. If large proportions of young (and older) Americans do not vote, this lessens their representation (and may change election outcomes). This is especially problematic when the government makes decisions that a full majority of Americans do not support. However, the goal of participation reforms should not be only to encourage young people to act like their grandparents (and vote out of a sense of duty), but also to show them how voting is as important as newer forms of participation.

Second, there is more to democracy than elections, and other forms of political activity have grown over time. These changes in the pattern of political action have implications for

democratic voice. More people today possess the political skills and resources to engage in more demanding forms of political action, such as individualized contact, direct action and contentious activities. Verba, Scholzman and Brady considered these non-electoral forms of political action as high information and often high pressure activities.²⁵ Direct action methods allow citizens to focus on their own issue interests, select the means of influencing policymakers, and choose the timing of influence. The topic might be as broad as nuclear disarmament or as narrow as the policies of the local school district—citizens, not elites, decide. Control over the framework of participation means that people can convey more information and exert more focused political pressure than they can through casting a ballot every four years. Political institutions are also adapting to accept and encourage these new forms of citizen access. In short, the control of political activism is shifting to the public and thereby increasing the quantity and quality of democratic influence.

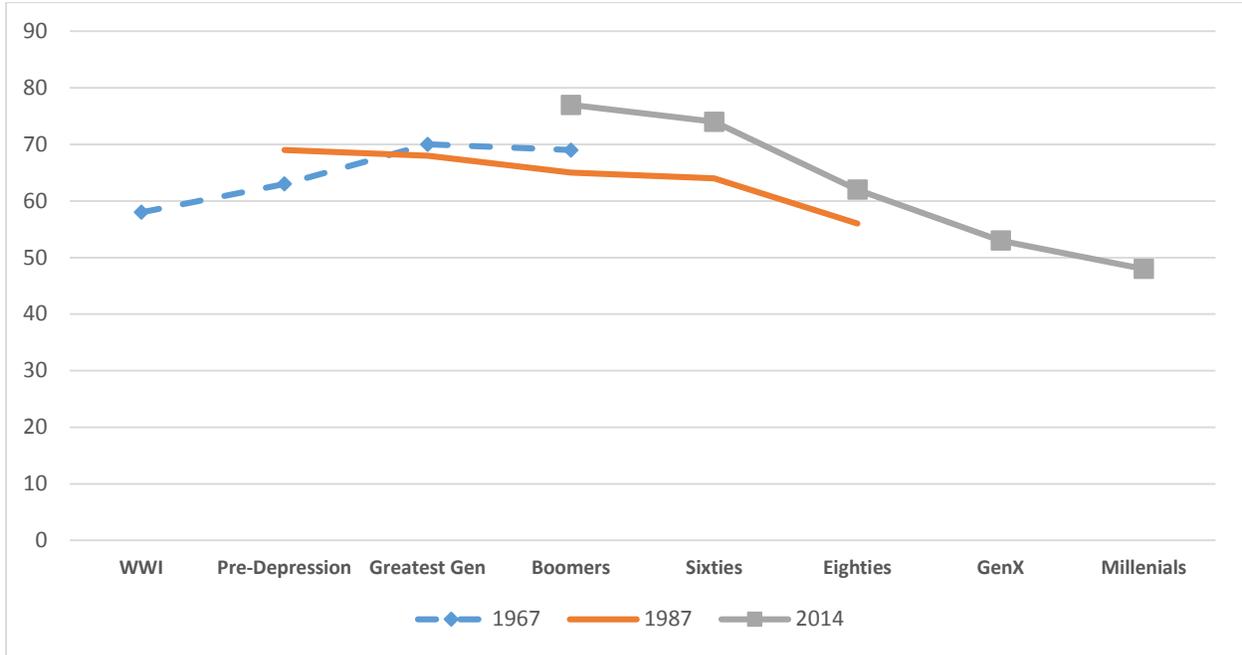
Third, the changing mix of participation activities may have negative implications for political equality. The noted democrat, the late Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, used to say that elections were the only instrument through which a working class citizen could exercise equal influence with the socially advantaged—because the demands of voting were modest and everyone got one vote. Social or political groups can also mobilize citizens through “get out the vote” drives that are a common part of our elections. In contrast, many of the new political channels place higher demands on the skills and resources of activists, and require more individual initiative. While the opportunities for participation are equal, these activities are disproportionately used by the politically sophisticated who possess political skills and resources. Educational differences in participation are greater for protest or community activity as compared to voting. The “one person, one vote” rule also does not apply, and individuals can write as many letters or attend as many meetings as they want, be active in multiple community groups, and participate in many protests. This has real implications for the voices expressed within the political process. The “politically rich” may become even richer using these new forms of action. Simultaneously, those without these same resources may lose influence, and democracy will suffer as a result. Consequently, a change in the mix of political

participation can increase the inequality of different sectors of society. Robert Putnam has recently shown that this inequality might be accentuated among younger generations.²⁶

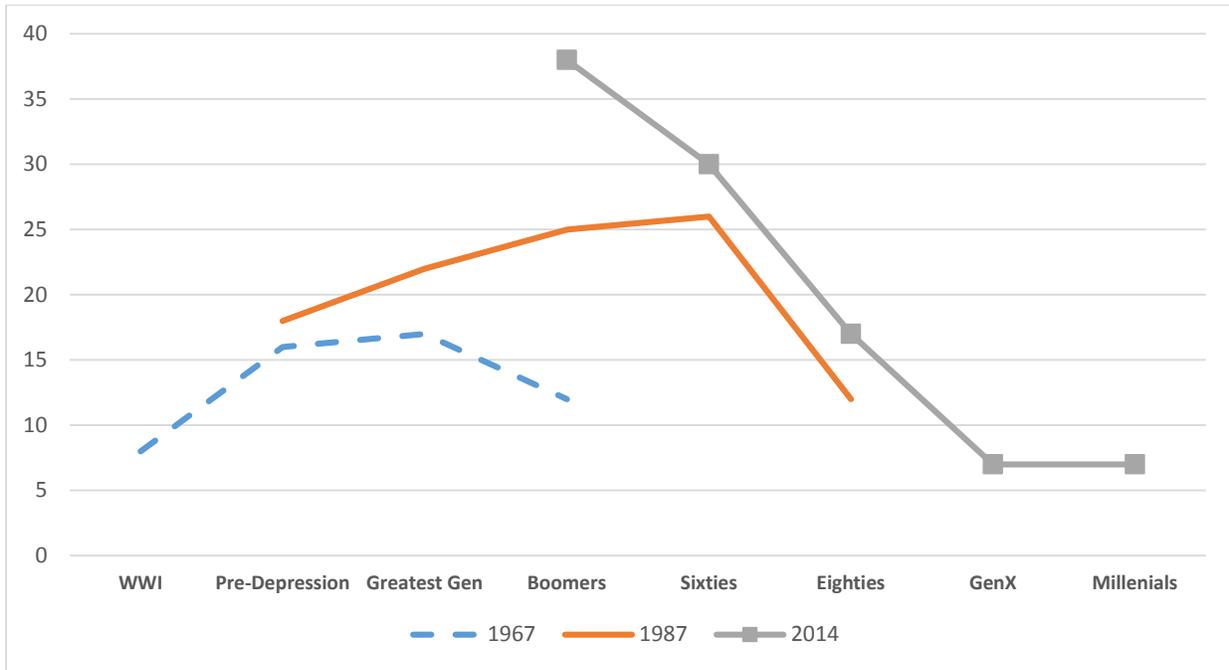
Although the results here disagree with those who lament Americans' disengagement from politics, we agree on the importance of this topic. Americans today are more active in more ways than they were in the late 1960s. Recognizing the full pattern of change should focus our attention on what actions are actually needed to adapt democracy to the public's shifting style of action and strengthen the democratic process. Tocqueville might not recognize the new styles of political action, and might have ambivalent feelings about some of these methods, but his characterization of an engaged American public still applies today.

Appendix: Generational Participation Patterns

Political Interest



Contributing Money



Endnotes

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- ¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Renewal of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), ch. 2.
- ² Stephen Macedo, ed. *Democracy at Risk* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005); Martin Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Janet Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, *Who Votes Now?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
- ³ Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Post-Modernization*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997): 307.
- ⁴ Russell Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, 2nd ed. (Washington: CQ Press, 2015), ch. 4; Cliff Zukin et al., *A New Engagement?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- ⁵ Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 3.
- ⁶ Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, ch. 3.
- ⁷ Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman and Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pg. 72.
- ⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*; Macedo, ed. *Democracy at Risk*.
- ⁹ GSS asked these questions in the 2014 wave of the 2010-2014 panel. The data are weighted to correct for panel non-response. The data are available at: <http://www3.norc.org/GSS+Website/Download/>.
- ¹⁰ Voting in national elections has rebounded from its nadir in 1996. See U.S. Election Project at George Mason University (<http://www.electproject.org>)
- ¹¹ Dalton, *The Good Citizen*.
- ¹² Gallup Poll and Pew Center trends show a slight increase in political interest between 1952 and 2000 ($r=.26$). These data are from the IPOLL database at the Roper Center.
- ¹³ The data are available at: <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/2000-social-capital-community-benchmark-survey/>.
- ¹⁴ Aaron Smith, *Civic Engagement in the Digital Age*, 2013. (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/>).
- ¹⁵ Lee Rainie, *Social Media and Voting*. (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/11/06/social-media-and-voting/>); Aaron Smith and Maeve Duggan, *Online Political Videos and Campaign 2012*, (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/11/02/online-political-videos-and-campaign-2012>).
- ¹⁶ Dietlind Stolle and Michele Micheletti, *Political Consumerism* (Cambridge: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁷ Shirley Sagawa, *The American Way to Change* (New York: John Wiley, 2010).
- ¹⁸ Michele Micheletti and A, McFarland, eds. *Creative Participation* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2010).
- ¹⁹ Zukin et al., *A New Engagement?*, pp. 72-77.
- ²⁰ We first defined historical periods: WWI generation (until 1918), pre-Depression generation

(1918-1929), Greatest generation (1930-1945), Boomer generation (1946–1960), Sixties generation (1961–1975), Eighties generation (1976–1990), Gen X (1991-2000), and Millennials (2001 or later). Then we assigned respondents to a generation based on when they turned age 18. Because the 2014 data are from a 2010 panel, this slightly underrepresents Millennials.

- ²¹ Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?*; Leighley and Nagler, *Who Votes Now?*
- ²² Dalton, *The Good Citizen*, ch. 3.
- ²³ Martin Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People* (New York: Pearson, 2009).
- ²⁴ Andrea Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- ²⁵ Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*
- ²⁶ Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015); Leighley and Nagler, *Who Votes Now?*