What’s the Matter with Kids Today?

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You might remember these lyrics from a popular song. The song’s refrain—“why can’t they be like we were, perfect in every way. Oh, what’s the matter with kids today?”—seemingly guides those political analysts who attribute many of the supposed ills of American democracy to the young.

On the one hand, a variety of authors—from Tom Brokaw to Bob Putnam—extol the civic values and engagement of the older, ‘greatest generation’ of Americans with great hyperbole. On the other hand, there is an apparently equal disdain for the young, who are described as the ‘doofus generation’ or the ‘invisible generation” even by journalists who are members of Generation X. For instance, William Damon recently states: “Young people across the world have been disengaging from civic and political activities to a degree unimaginable a mere generation ago. The lack of interest is greatest in mature democracies, but it is evident even in many emerging or troubled ones. Today there are no leaders, no causes, no legacy of past trials or accomplishments that inspire much more than apathy or cynicism from the young.” In his influential book, Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam holds that the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of older civic generations by baby boomers and especially Generation X and Y is the most important reason for the erosion of social capital. A recent study by the American Political Science Association claims that “Democracy is at Risk”, and the young are the source of this angst. Perhaps not since Aristotle held that “political science is not a proper study for the young”, have youth been so roundly criticized by their elders.

Are American youth really this bad? Young people seem disengaged with voting turnout, and alienated from electoral politics—but so too are many older Americans. Moreover, other evidence points to increases in other forms of political action among the young. In addition, a variety of causes still motivate the young, such as the initiatives to address poverty in Africa (and America) or improve the global (and American) environment. Thus, there is counter evidence that young Americans are changing their style of political action rather than dropping out from politics entirely. And in other domains, younger Americans may display traits that are positive for democracy and society—but lacking among their elders.
To explore these contrasting ideas, this essay summarizes some initial findings from a new national public opinion survey by the Center for Democracy and the Third Sector (CDATS) at Georgetown University that probed into the patterns of citizenship among Americans. The survey conducted in-person interviews with 1001 respondents between May 16 and July 19, 2005. Some of our findings contradict the dire claims that American democracy is at risk because of its youth. The young think differently from their elders, and act differently—but different does not always hold negative implications for our nation.

Generations and New Concepts of Citizenship

Implicit in the above arguments of generational change is the claim that the norms of citizenship are changing across the generations, which produces different patterns of participation, as well as other behavioral consequences. Older Americans typically castigate the young for not being like them—and attribute negative political developments to the eroding values and poor behavior of the young. This is what old people do best—they complain. The fact that the young may not think of citizenship in the same terms as their elders is presented as evidence that the young lack desirable citizenship norms.

To probe how Americans think about citizenship, CDATS asks: “To be a good citizen, how important is it for a person to be . . . [list items]. 0 is extremely unimportant and 10 is extremely important.” Respondents then evaluated the importance of ten potential norms. Our analyses of these items identify two distinct patterns of citizenship:

- **Citizenship as Duty** involves norms of social order—serving a jury, obeying the law, serving in the military and reporting a crime—and the duty of voting. This is the classic model of a citizen-subject that is well known in the political culture literature.

- **Engaged Citizenship** includes concern for the well-being of others, forming one's own opinion, and two participation examples: being active in civil society groups and general political activity. The engaged citizen appears willing to act on his/her principles, be politically independent, and address social needs.
These two sets of norms are not contradictory, and all are cited as important by most Americans (see mean scores), but they reflect contrasting emphases in the role of a democratic citizen. There are two faces of citizenship in America, with distinctly different emphases of what it means to be a good citizen.

As we might expect, there is a clear shift in distribution of citizenship norms across age groups (Figure 1). Older Americans who are part of the World War II and the postwar boomer generation score highest on citizen duty. These individuals think of citizenship in terms of their duty to vote in elections, to follow the laws, and to support the social order. These sentiments steadily weaken among the 1960s generation and GenX and GenY. Expressed in other terms, there is a strong positive relationship ($r=.20$) between age and duty-based citizenship. This is the pattern that analysts typically discuss, leading to negative commentaries on how a declining sense of duty among the young is eroding the foundations of democracy.

At the same time, Figure 1 shows that the erosion of duty-based norms is counter-balanced by greater support for norms of engaged citizenship among the young. There is a weak negative correlation between age and these norms ($r=-.05$). A concern for others, independent thinking, and engaging in non-electoral politics are hardly undemocratic or un-American values—although few analysts write about the lack of such values among older Americans.

This figure displays a simple truth. Claims about the decline in citizenship values among younger Americans are incorrect. Rather, there is a generational shift in the types of citizenship norms that Americans stress. Americans socialized before and immediately after World War II are more likely to define citizenship in terms of duties and obligations. Indeed, one might argue that these are the norms of a good subject (though not necessarily a good democratic participant).
in the terms of Almond and Verba’s classic concept in *The Civic Culture*. These norms would lead one to vote out of a sense of duty, to feel a duty to obey the law, and to be somewhat deferential to elites. In contrast, the young reflect a new political reality, and stress alternative norms that should encourage a more rights conscious public, a socially engaged public, and a more deliberative image of citizenship. Both norms have positive (and negative) implications for the practice of citizenship and the workings of the democratic process.

**Changes in Political Participation**

One of the primary grounds for this generational debate involves the changing levels of political participation in America. Typically, young Americans are cited as a primary source of decreasing turnout in elections, and this is generalized to a supposed disdain with all of politics.

Comparing age differences in participation groups provides evidence of whether generational change is eroding the participatory tradition of Americans. As a baseline model, we should expect increasing political involvement with age, as individuals assume more family and career responsibilities and become integrated into their political communities. This is generally known as the ‘*life cycle model*’ of political participation. So all else being equal, older Americans are expected to be more politically active. However, the recent criticism of young Americans claims that a *generational effect* has dropped the engagement of young Americans to a lower baseline, so that overall participation rates have decreased.

The 2005 CDATS/CIDS survey is well-positioned to examine the full repertoire of political action because it measures participation for fourteen different political activities. The survey asked respondents whether they had performed each activity in the previous 12 months, which overlaps with the 2004 national elections. For participation in voting and campaigns, life cycle patterns and generational differences in citizenship norms appear to be reinforcing. Older voters are more engrained in voting as a duty, while the young are critical of partisan politics and less duty-oriented. Consequently, there is a strong positive relationship between age and voting ($r=.26$), and for donating money (.10), working for a political party or campaign (.08), or displaying a campaign badge or bumper sticker (.04). These are the participation patterns that
lead analysts to castigate the young for their limited engagement, and to argue that the limited
campaign involvement of the young bodes ill for the future.

However, an exclusive focus on participation in voting and campaigns is a very
traditional and highly restrictive definition of political action. The modern citizen can use a
broad repertoire of political activities, such as forms of protest, direct action and collective
activity. A generational shift toward norms of engaged citizenship should reinforce new, non-
voting participation among the young.

Our analyses find that for many of these non-electoral forms of action, the participation
of the young is so common that it reverses the normal life cycle pattern. Young Americans are
more active in buying products for political reasons (-.09), attending legal demonstrations (-.14),
visiting political websites (-.09), and participating in internet-based political actions (-.08). These
are the new forms of political action—and they are the domains of the young, and the life cycle
model implies that these activities may even increase further as Gen-Xers age. In summary, it is
too simple to claim that the young are politically inactive—they are active, albeit in different
ways.

We should not ignore the lower voting turnout rates of young Americans, because when
they stay home from the polls this limits their influence in the political process and may even
shift electoral outcomes. But rather than declining electoral participation signaling a broad
decline in political engagement among the young, the changing norms of citizenship are shifting
political participation to other forms of action. And, if reformers want to re-engage young in
electoral politics, they should realize that their alienation from party politics and changing norms
of citizenship—rather than the absence of political interest—is the source of declining turnout.

Volunteering

The Los Angeles Times recently began an article on the annual UCLA survey of college
freshmen with a story of a California university student who spent his fall break as a volunteer
helping to salvage homes flooded by Hurricane Katrina. He organized a group with other student
volunteers to give up their break to do hard labor in a devastated region. The message of the
article was that volunteering in 2005 was at its highest percentage in the 25 years of the UCLA
college survey.

This experience stands in marked contrast to the drumbeat of negativity about the involvement of young Americans beyond the political arena. We are told by political scientists and presidents that young Americans are not ‘good citizens’ as they once were, and more civic engagement and citizenship is needed. Even the increase in protest, direct action, and internet activity among the young that we have just described is sometimes cited as part of the individualist drift in the American political culture where civic community and the willingness to work with others is lacking among the young.

To test the civic spirit of Americans, the CDATS survey asked four questions about volunteerism:

- Are you registered as an organ donor
- Have you donated blood in the last five years
- Have you given to charity in the last year
- Have you picked up someone else’s litter in the last year

These examples reflect the type of civic contribution that supposedly is central to the American communal spirit, but which political scientists and politicians claim is lacking among the public and especially the young.

Ironically, Figure 2 shows a generally negative relationship between age and various forms of civic volunteering. This may be a reflection of the increased emphasis on volunteering as part of civic education in high schools, but it also reflects greater adherence to the norms of engaged citizenship among the young. Volunteering drops off for the under 30s, but this possibly reflects their life style stage, where giving to charity or donating blood is not yet established for age reasons. But from 30-years on, volunteering steadily decreases. The greatest
generation apparently does not give blood or pick up litter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many contemporary experts apparently look back to the 1950s as a golden age of American politics and want to renew an image of citizenship and participation identified with this era. Young Americans are routinely criticized because they do not share this vision, and thus they do not act as their elders.

This essay argues that this retrospective definition of citizenship is too narrow—and probably seeks to revive an age that was not so golden. A retrospective view focusing on the positive aspects of traditional norms ignores the potential negative elements of these norms—and the potential gains from other definitions of citizenship. Young Americans are committed to good citizenship, but it is to a model of citizenship that this substantially different from the norms of their parents and grandparents. Other analyses from the CDATS survey indicate that these new norms of citizenship stimulate positive benefits for democracy and society that analysts have overlooked in their praise of duty-based citizenship: expanding repertoires of political action, more volunteerism, greater political tolerance, and a stronger commitment to civil liberties and democratic values. Indeed, instead of humming the tune to the song described in the introduction, young Americans might be thinking of another song to share with their elders, the words begin “Teach your parents well . . . ”.
Further Readings

Additional information on the CDATS survey is available at www8.georgetown.edu/centers/cdatscid.htm.

The full paper for this abridged article is Russell Dalton, “Citizenship Norms and Political Participation in America: The Good News is . . . the Bad News is Wrong,” (www.socsci.uci.edu/~rdalton/dalton1.pdf).


Appendix: Importance of Citizenship Norms

Source: 2005 CDATS Survey.