*Rethinking Apathy: The Impacts of Deliberative Democracy Facilitation on America’s Youth*

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Prepared for presentation at the Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting

March 24-26, 2016

San Diego, CA

Abstract

*Political observers have long lamented the low political involvement of America’s youth. Indeed, voter turnout rates for 18-24 year olds have consistently fallen 20-30 points below older voters, leading some to warn of a “crisis of democracy.” However, more recent scholars (Dalton 2008) argue that the American youth population, while not active in traditional electoral politics, is actually quite involved in newer forms of community life. In short, they are politically active but in unconventional ways, often shunning traditional political participation in favor of activities that feel more impactful and meaningful to them. This research explores the attitudinal and vocational changes that occur when 18-24 year olds have the opportunity to participate in a particular type of unconventional political activity – a deliberative democracy forum. Using an original survey design, we analyze data regarding the civic attitudes and vocational aspirations of the youth population. We find that participation in the forum resulted in changed attitudes with regard to political efficacy, political participation, civility, and the likelihood of choosing a career in public service. This research contributes to a larger conversation about the ways in which the millennial generation involves themselves in politics – from a simple willingness to talk politics with friends to aiming for a career in public service – and how deliberative democracy impacts their political behavior and attitudes.*

Introduction

Since 1972, when 18 year olds were granted the right to vote with the twenty-sixth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, political observers have lamented the low political involvement of America’s youth. Indeed, voter turnout rates for 18-24 year olds have consistently fallen 15-20 points below that of voters over the age of 25. However, more recent scholars (Dalton 2008) have argued that while America’s youth are not particularly active in traditional electoral politics, they are actually quite involved in newer forms of community life and public affairs. In short, they are politically active but in unconventional ways, often shunning traditional political participation (such as voting) in favor of activities that feel more impactful and meaningful to them (such as joining public interest groups or civic associations). Thus, claims of a “democracy crisis” due to waning voter turnout may be overblown (Wattenberg 2011), particularly as they relate to the youth of America.

This research focuses on the political attitudes and behaviors of America’s youth population, particularly the ways in which they react to and are changed by more discursive forms of democracy. We theorize that democratic deliberation practices are ideally suited for today’s American youth population, as these practices make citizens more active political participants, in ways that are far more engaging than the typical voting experience. And while some have studied this nexus of youth engagement and deliberative democracy (Carcasson and Sprain 2010), it is an area that remains empirically under-examined. We seek to fill this gap with this research project.

Specifically, this research asks: are the civic attitudes and vocational ambitions of 18-24 year olds changed when they not only participate in, but facilitate, a deliberative democracy forum about a social problem? With regard to civic attitudes, we are interested in six attitudinal impacts in particular: feelings of political efficacy, hopefulness regarding politics, pride in the political system, perceptions of civility, perceptions of power distribution, and likelihood of future political participation. We are also interested in whether or not these attitudinal changes are accompanied by a shift in vocational ambition, either in public service or in politics more generally.

This research consists of a longitudinal panel survey of undergraduate college students over a 12 month time period. The university is a small, private liberal arts college in Southern California. The research process began with a pre-survey in January 2015, at the start of an upper-division political science course: *Issues in Public Policy*. Students in the course completed an initial survey inquiring about their civic attitudes and career ambitions. Because the surveys were conducted in class, there was a 100% response rate (though a low N of 19). During the course, the students read seminal pieces from the deliberative democracy literature and discussed the ways in which deliberative practices contrast with traditional policymaking. They also analyzed the community-building prospects of public deliberation and grassroots engagement with policymakers, while also discussing the potential pitfalls of public dialogue. Finally, the students organized, planned, and facilitated a community forum on the “wicked problem” of water policy in California, bringing together groups of people with different values and goals to discuss possible policy solutions to California’s draught. The students then participated in a post-survey at the end of the course, in order to assess any changed attitudes or career goals. This survey had an 84% response rate (N=16). The students were then contacted and surveyed again (by email) in January 2016, to assess if any observed trends held for a longer period of time (response rate of 42% and N=8).

Literature Review

*Youth Civic Engagement*

In order to assess the impact of deliberative facilitation on young Americans, it is important to first review the research on the current state of youth political participation­. Much of this literature has focused on whether there is a “crisis of democracy” or, in contrast, if the American youth population is simply becoming more involved in unconventional modes of political participation (Flanagan, 2010; Dalton 2008). Below, we discuss this debate, as well as some other findings with regard to youth civic engagement.

Many look to explain the low levels of youth involvement by highlighting the inequalities present in our society. For instance, Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (2003) look at the impacts of socioeconomic status on levels of political engagement, finding that lower SES groups tend to have lower levels of participation. These lower levels of engagement for the parents then transfer to the children through the typical political socialization paths, leading to lower levels of engagement for the children. Indeed, this work builds on the work of Nie almost a decade earlier, when he found that societal inequalities impact generations of families and their levels of political participation: “occupational prominence, family income, and nonpolitical organizational membership strongly influence the placement of citizens in the social network” (Nie 1996, 53). Thus, as socioeconomic inequality worsens in American society, it is argued that levels of political participation for the children of low SES families will continue to fall.

This concept of political engagement transferability and its relevance to youth participation is best understood through theories of political socialization, which can be explained as “political paths” where “politically active parents leave a legacy of political involvement to their children” (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003, 47). Political socialization therefore involves the transference – via social institutions – of political knowledge, values, and behaviors from older generations to younger generations (Dudley and Gitelson 2003; McIntosh 2007). Ultimately youth that are given the opportunity to grapple with political issues and participate in civic groups will be more likely to be engaged citizens (Flanagan 2004; Youniss 1997; Settersten 2005). This is largely because the youth are in a period of cognitive and behavioral flexibility (Settersten 2005), and are thus receptive to civic engagement socialization. For instance, Yates and Youniss (1997) find that service-oriented participation during high school translates into civic identity for these students, which results in students feeling a sense of civic purpose and societal responsibility to solve problems. Therefore, political socialization is critical in understanding youth political participation trends in America.

But are the youth of America civically disconnected? As indicated in the introduction, voting levels seem to indicate that they are. Indeed, voter turnout for 18-24 year olds has fallen 20-30 points below older voters for close to four decades (Circle 2014). The literature on youth disengagement often points to low levels of political knowledge as the cause of low levels of participation (Dudley 2003). Dudley argues that it is difficult for individuals to make rational political decisions based on their best interests if they don’t have political knowledge and information (Dudley 2003), leaving many to opt out of the participation acts entirely. Similarly, Merelman (1971) argues that adolescents lack the ability to critically think about policy. These low levels of political cognition and participation in America’s youth have led many to conclude that the future of American democracy is at risk.

However, others dispute this argument, instead pointing to the ways in which the youth have simply shifted their style of participation (Dalton 2008). Indeed, Levine (2007) points out that data showing a decline in youth civic engagement tends to measure “only traditional forms of participation, such as voting, belonging to unions and organized religious congregations, and displaying signs and signing petitions” (94). Levine describes the youth as civic innovators that are exchanging bumper stickers for blogs and websites – creating a shift from the conventional forms of participation to these unconventional opportunities (Levine 2007). This shift from traditional forms is critical for our research, as democratic deliberation is a form of unconventional participation, and therefore potentially attractive to youth.

Thus, America’s youth are largely alienated from traditional politics, but they are certainly not apolitical. Today’s post-materialist youth simply have different value structures, political priorities, and issue interests, all of which make them the quintessential modern American political participant. Along these lines, the 21st century resurgence of the deliberative democracy movement – arguably around since early Athens – should be viewed as another way to engage America’s youth in the political process.

*Deliberative Democracy*

In this section, we briefly review the literature on deliberative democracy. To be sure, this literature is vast and at times, lacking in a common language or conceptual consensus. In order to maximize focus and minimize confusion, we discuss just four areas of the literature: definitions and explanations, deliberative politics as compared to expert and adversarial politics, intentionality with regard to creating and embedding deliberative norms and institutions (with a particular focus on the role of universities), and finally, whether or not deliberative democracy yields the civic benefits that many simply assume exist. We discuss each in turn, ending with a brief conversation about how we contribute to the nexus between the deliberative democracy and youth civic engagement literature.

First, it is important to define and clarify our concepts and terms. In summarizing the research on the topic, Nabatchi (2012) defines deliberative civic engagement as “processes that enable citizens, civic leaders, and government officials to come together in public spaces where they can engage in constructive, informed, and decisive dialogue about important public issues” (7). As many scholars note, the key to such engagement – and the way to make it a path toward more authentic democracy – is to ensure that such dialogue is *reasoned*, allowing for thoughtful and respectful discussion that encourages mutual understanding (Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Nabatchi 2012; Yankelovich 2013). And when both the public and the policymakers participate in this process, the entire political system shifts toward a more participatory mode of democracy, as both citizens and policymakers must clearly, transparently, and frequently offer justifications for their points of view (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 13). In particular, the frequency with which justifications must be offered is what leads to a sustained and entrenched system of discursive-based democracy. Deliberative democracy then “is a particular model of democracy in which public deliberation is embedded in institutions, norms, and practices” (Nabatchi 2012, 8). In other words, a political system bent toward deliberative democracy is a system in which the public and policymakers collectively engage in reason-based problem analysis with regard to social and political issues.

Indeed, much of the research on deliberative democracy focuses on how it acts as a counterweight to two other types of problem analysis: expert and adversarial. Carcasson (2013) argues that both adversarial politics, which relies heavily on partisan and interest group politics, and expert politics, which relies heavily on public administrators, are the two dominant forms of public problem-solving in American politics today. And while the American political system needs both experts and group-based advocacy, an overreliance on them can often exacerbate the many “wicked” social and political problems we face in our modern society (Carcasson 2013, 9). Thus, Carcasson introduces a third type of politics and problem-solving: deliberative civic engagement. According to Carcasson, this form of politics, with its reliance on genuine interaction, is the essence of a modern democracy in that it is the counterweight to an unhealthy dependence on experts and advocates: “such a perspective envisions democracy as an ongoing collaborative process of constant communication and negotiation focused on solving common problems, rather than an adversarial zero-sum exercise between stable, competing interests, or a technocratic world of experts searching for the best solutions” (Carcasson 2013, 10). Fischer (2009) agrees, arguing that political experts should become more involved in public deliberations and that everyday citizens can and should participate in politics in more active and participatory ways. As both groups move closer together, the political system becomes a more discursive democracy – and one that more fully balances the necessary roles of experts, advocates, and the public. But given that the system is now so reliant on experts and advocates, how do we move the political system toward more deliberative forms of engagement? In other words, how does public deliberation come to be embedded in the system? This leads us to the third area of the deliberative democracy literature we would like to discuss: intentionality.

The intentionality with which we must move toward deliberative democracy is a focal point for many deliberative democracy scholars. Because the deliberative democracy literature often stems from a theoretical – and therefore normative – perspective, it can often be misread in terms of the arguments surrounding the inherent altruistic and the community-focused nature of people. Indeed, while almost all deliberative democracy theorists come from a pluralist perspective of democracy, they do not typically offer a view of human nature that says that we are innately cooperative. Instead, they recognize that community, cooperation, and mutualism must be deliberately built from the ground up. Barber (2004) in particular rejects the idea that humans are naturally and completely social in their desires (133). Instead, he sees humans as inherently both “cooperative and antagonistic;” thus, he argues that community must be intentionally created – often in concert with government – in a way that stokes the social nature of humans (215). Similarly, scholars such as Fagotto and Fung (2009), Fischer (2009), Yankelovich (2013), Boyte (2013) argue that citizens and their government must – together – purposefully work to introduce and embed more deliberative, and thus inclusive, forms of politics.

In speaking about the intentionality with which deliberative democracy must be built and embedded, many deliberative democracy scholars have noted the historically important role of the American university as a bastion of civic engagement, in terms of both its educational mission and its longstanding role as a hub of community discussion and a promoter of open-minded thought. However, Fischer (2009) also points out the ways in which universities have often contributed to the problem of low citizen participation. He writes that beginning in the late 18th century, universities increasingly contributed to the overreliance on expert problem-solving by embracing the movement toward a managerial-oriented model of technical, knowledge-based professional civil service (Fischer 2009, 19). The result was that universities became the primary trainers of the expert problem-solvers.

However, Fischer also points out that today, universities can continue to produce the bureaucratic experts needed by the political system, but can simultaneously help to engage local citizens in grassroots research exercises aimed at community problem-solving (Fischer 2009, 97). Similarly, Mathews (2014) notes the ways in which institutions of higher education help everyday citizens gain important public knowledge about complex policy issues, thereby reducing the barriers to entry into the political arena. And Scott London (2010) describes the growing network of “centers for public life” – the vast majority of which are housed on university campuses – that is contributing to what he describes as a civic engagement renewal movement. These centers, he argues, have both on-campus and off-campus impacts. On campus, these grassroots organizations deepen the scholarship of the faculty, enrich the classroom by introducing deliberative forms of problem-solving, and contribute to a more democratic campus culture (London 2010, 21-22). Off campus, the centers contribute to the public good, with previous research showing the range of impacts: “increased voter turnout, heightened civic participation, strengthened civic capacity, deepened trust and mutual understanding, spanned social, political and economic boundaries, reached out to traditionally underrepresented populations, brought an end to stalemates on intractable issues, influenced public attitudes, and shaped public policy” (London 2010, 23). Therefore, universities are increasingly important in terms of their ability to house deliberative democracy centers, engaging both students and the broader community in the process of public deliberation. This institutionalization helps to create a social “habit of deliberation” (Fagotto and Fung 2009) that is more sustainable than short bursts of political engagement and activity.

In reviewing the literature on both deliberative democracy and youth civic engagement, we see a gap in the research. While youth engagement in unconventional forms of political activity has been well-documented, most of this research has focused on a few modes of participation: protest, political boycotting and buycotting, and wired activism (Dalton 2008). We seek to expand this research by looking at deliberative democratic forums as a form of unconventional political participation and specifically, whether or not this mode of political activity resonates with American youth.

Findings

This research asks: are the civic attitudes and vocational ambitions of 18-24 year olds changed when they facilitate a deliberative democracy forum? Specifically, we looked at six attitudinal impacts: feelings of political efficacy, hopefulness regarding politics, pride in the political system, perceptions of civility, perceptions of power distribution, and likelihood of future political participation. We also looked at shifts in vocational ambition, either in public service or in politics more generally. We discuss our findings for each area below.

*Political Efficacy*

In the pre-surveys, students generally had strong feelings of political efficacy, with 85% of students responding “agree” or “strongly agree” when asked whether they feel as though they can affect change in the system. Immediately following the forum, this number remained relatively unchanged (81%), though more students moved into the “strongly agree” category (25% as compared to 11% in the pre-survey). However, the level of optimism with regard to formal gatherings increased more dramatically, with 43% of students in the pre-survey answering “disagree” or “strongly disagree” when asked about the lack of impact of formal, discursive gatherings on policymaking – this jumped to 69% in the post-survey. In the second post-survey, this optimism was even higher, with 88% answering “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” The results appear in Table 1 below.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | **Neutral** | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** |
| **Pre-survey**  **(January 2015)** | 0% | 26% | 32% | 32% | 11% |
| **Post-survey 1**  **(May 2015)** | 0% | 6% | 25% | 63% | 6% |
| **Post-survey 2**  **(January 2016)** | 0% | 13% | 0% | 88% | 0% |

**Table 1: Percentage response to the question “If a group of people gathers formally to discuss their political ideas, it will *not* impact policymaking very much.”**

Finally, when asked on the first post-survey whether they felt like more of a citizen of American democracy than they did at the beginning of the course, more than half of the students (57%) responded “agree” or “strongly agree.” A year later, in the second post-survey, 88% answered “agree” or “strongly agree.” Given that many of our course discussions centered on elite theories of power distribution and policymaking, these numbers are striking.

*Participation*

When surveyed about participation, we asked students about both their own participation and the general population’s participation. With regards to levels of apathy in the political system, in both the pre-survey and the first post-survey, about half of the students agreed that people are generally apathetic when it comes to politics. However, it seems as though they did not consider themselves to be in this category, as a vast majority (89% in the pre-survey, 82% in the first post-survey, and 100% in the second post-survey) answered “agree” or “strongly agree” when asked about the likelihood that they will be very politically active throughout their lifetime. And yet, on the first post-survey, when asked whether their generation was more of a “service” generation than a “voting” generation, 38% answered “strongly agree” and 50% answered “agree,” indicating that they are not as confident in their peers’ likelihood of political activism.

When asked about formal gatherings acting as a catalyst to other forms of participation, the students did shift in their perceptions after facilitating the forum (see Table 2).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | **Neutral** | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** |
| **Pre-survey**  **(January 2015)** | 16% | 58% | 21% | 5% | 0% |
| **Post-survey 1**  **(May 2015)** | 13% | 88% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| **Post-survey 2**  **(January 2016)** | 38% | 50% | 13% | 0% | 0% |

**Table 2: Percentage response to the question “If a group of people gathers formally to discuss political issues, it will likely encourage them to participate in other political activities.”**

The results in Table 2 indicate that the students’ role as facilitators of the deliberative forum made them more optimistic about the impact of such gatherings on participants’ later political activism.

*Hopefulness*

Students did not change much in their levels of hope and optimism about the American political system after facilitating the forum. When asked whether they are pessimistic about American politics, the level of pessimism decreased only slightly (39% to 26%) after the forum. In addition, when asked whether conversations about American politics leave them feeling hopeful, the numbers remained almost exactly the same (42% answered “disagree” or “strongly disagree” in the pre-survey, 44% in the first post-survey, and 50% in the second post-survey). In the second post-survey, their level of pessimism rose back to the pre-survey level at 38%.

*Pride*

In trying to tap into the concept of “pride,” we asked two questions – one with regard to the design of the American political system and one with regard to the functionality. With both questions – and both before and after the deliberative forum – about half of students expressed pride in the system. We asked a question about the design of the political system (“I feel proud of the design of the structures and institutions in the American political system”) and before the forum, 16% of students answered “strongly agree” and 37% answered “agree.” After the forum (in the first post-survey), 6% answered “strongly agree” and 44% answered “agree.” In the second post-survey, 0% answered “strongly agree” and 50% answered “agree”. Before the forum, 21% of students answered “disagree” or “strongly disagree” to the same question, and after the forum (in the first post-survey), 31% answered “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” In the second post-survey, 38% answered “disagree” or “strongly disagree.”

Students also lacked pride – and perhaps even more so – in the functionality of the political and this lack of pride worsened after the forum. Table 3 reports these findings.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | **Neutral** | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** |
| **Pre-survey**  **(January 2015)** | 0% | 32% | 26% | 37% | 5% |
| **Post-survey 1**  **(May 2015)** | 0% | 31% | 6% | 44% | 19% |
| **Post-survey 2**  **(January 2016)** | 0% | 38% | 13% | 25% | 25% |

**Table 3: Percentage response to the question “I feel proud of how the American political system functions in reality.”**

It could be that the students’ participation in the forum highlighted some of the shortcomings of the functionality of the political system, and therefore the disconnect between the democratic design and the reality of the system.

*Civility*

Both before and after the forum, students’ responses to questions of civility in politics tended to be wide-ranging. When asked about uncivil conversations about politics (“When people have everyday conversations about politics, these conversations tend to spiral into negativity”), a slight majority of students (53%) responded “agree” or “strongly agree” before the forum. Immediately following the forum, 44% of students responded “agree” or “strongly agree.” Both before and immediately after the forum, there were low levels of disagreement (26% and 25% respectively), with higher numbers falling in the “neutral” category (21% and 31% respectively).

There was more post-forum movement when asked about productive conversations. The results are reported in Table 4 below.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | **Neutral** | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** |
| **Pre-survey**  **(January 2015)** | 5% | 16% | 42% | 32% | 5% |
| **Post-survey 1**  **(May 2015)** | 0% | 44% | 25% | 31% | 0% |
| **Post-survey 2**  **(January 2016)** | 13% | 50% | 0% | 25% | 13% |

**Table 4: Percentage response to the question “When I have conversations about politics in America, I often leave feeling as though it was productive.”**

When asked in the first post-survey about people’s willingness to tolerate viewpoints different from their own, more than half (56%) of the students responded “agree” or “strongly agree,” while 31% fell in the “neutral” category. Similarly, fully 81% of students in the first post-survey agreed (or strongly agreed) that methods of civic engagement and “democratic talk” could act as an antidote to the polarization of politics in America. However, this optimism fell off a bit in the second post-survey: when asked about people’s willingness to tolerate viewpoints different from their own, only 38% of students agreed or strongly agreed. And yet optimism remained with regard to deliberative methods: When asked about “democratic talk” acting as an antidote to the polarization of politics in America, 100% of the students agreed (or strongly agreed) in the second post-survey.

*Power*

In an effort to understand how students view influence and decision-making in American politics, we asked some questions about power distribution. Interestingly, in all three surveys, 100% of students responded “agree” or “strongly agree” when asked about power inequality in American politics (“I do not feel that all voices are heard equally throughout the American political system”). However, when asked whether they feel as though their own opinion matters, in both the pre-survey and first post-survey, a vast majority of students agreed or strongly agreed (74% in the pre-survey and 69% in the first post-survey and 76% in the second post-survey). The seeming contradiction in these results could indicate that the students recognize their own position of power and authority – as college-educated, mostly white and mostly middle and upper class students.

*Vocation*

Finally, we were interested in knowing more about students’ vocational ambitions, particularly with regard to the likelihood that they would consider a career in politics or public service. The results appear below.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | **Neutral** | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** |
| **Pre-survey**  **(January 2015)** | 28% | 44% | 17% | 6% | 6% |
| **Post-survey 1**  **(May 2015)** | 38% | 38% | 0% | 19% | 6% |
| **Post-survey 2**  **(January 2016)** | 50% | 25% | 13% | 13% | 0% |

**Table 5: Percentage response to the question “I am considering a career in public service (working for the government in the public sector).”**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Strongly Agree** | **Agree** | **Neutral** | **Disagree** | **Strongly Disagree** |
| **Pre-survey**  **(January 2015)** | 0% | 37% | 26% | 32% | 5% |
| **Post-survey 1**  **(May 2015)** | 0% | 27% | 33% | 33% | 7% |
| **Post-survey 2**  **(January 2016)** | 0% | 29% | 29% | 29% | 14% |

**Table 6: Percentage response to the question “I am considering a career in politics but not as a government employee.”**

Facilitating the forum did not seem to change any vocational ambitions, other than perhaps to push some students to feel more strongly about a career in public service, as some moved into the “strongly agree” category and some into the “disagree” category. In short, the forum may have solidified some students’ plans for a political career, while also causing others to realize that a political career is not for them.

Discussion

While the results show that the students generally had a positive experience in facilitating the deliberative forum, they did also express some reservations. When asked on the first post-survey about the limitations of deliberative democracy (“I see some limitations to a deliberative approach to civic engagement and policymaking”), more than half answered “agree” or “strongly agree.” The reasons for these answers are not clear, as their responses to an open-ended question about their experience in planning and facilitating the deliberative forum indicated a great deal of optimism regarding the power of such forums. One political science major commented: “I learned that people can absolutely have the capacity to understand and participate in deliberative politics when given the right tools.” Another wrote: “Participating in the forum was insightful. I believe it can be used to effectively carry out democracy.” One student did comment on the difficulty of taking notes, keeping time, and keeping everyone on track with the conversation, and these could be the concerns of others who also saw the limitations.

We also asked an open-ended question on the first post-survey about whether (and in what way) their attitude toward American politics has shifted over the course of the semester. A little more than half of the students indicated that their attitude toward American politics had shifted, and of those, about ¾ of the students had become more hopeful and optimistic. One student wrote: “Over the course of the semester, my attitude toward American politics has shifted in a way [such] that deliberative democracy could have a great impact on democracy.” Another student made a similar comment but qualified it: “I have been introduced to the deliberative approach and bottom-up politics and this has made me more hopeful about the future of decision-making in America. Unless policymakers are included in the conversation, however, not much will change.”

For those that indicated that their attitude toward American politics had stayed the same (a little less than half of the class), for some this stagnation meant continued optimism while for others it meant continued pessimism. One student wrote: “If anything, my beliefs have been reaffirmed that politics is elite and expert-driven and that it is hard to bring people to the table and get them to care.” In contrast, another student wrote: “My view of politics has been and remains relatively positive. I have felt and still feel like I could have a great influence if I took the right steps, and now I understand those steps better.”

Conclusion

We began this research with a straightforward and basic interest: to better understand the civic engagement patterns of the millennial generation. One of us *is* a millennial and a fourth year undergraduate student, while the other is a Gen Xer who spends most of her days around millennial political science majors who seem to adhere to claims that their generation is “service-oriented” but not “politically-oriented.” Both of us were personally concerned and academically intrigued.

Is there indeed a crisis of democracy as many have warned? We do not think so, as we agree with scholars who argue that younger generations have simply shifted in the types of political activities in which they engage. As such, deliberative democracy forums match the style of politics preferred by the younger generation, as they rely on high levels of cognitive mobilization (a trait of the highly educated millennial generation) and they can seem more impactful (a characteristic desired by the millennial generation).

In this research, we found that participation in the forum resulted in changed attitudes with regard to political efficacy, political participation, civility, and the likelihood of choosing a career in public service. Students increased in their optimism with regard to the efficacy and engagement of deliberative gatherings, they see the possibility for productive political conversations, and they continue to think about entering the field of public service or politics as a career option. Thus, claims of youth civic disengagement seem to be overstated, as many do indeed seek to participate in the democratic process. However, if the traditional political structure does not adjust to include and promote more unconventional modes of participation, we risk alienating this generation.

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