**The Kids Are Alright:**

**Connective Identity and the Youth Climate Movement**

“And these children that you spit on
As they try to change their worlds
Are immune to your consultations
They're quite aware of what they're goin' through.”

David Bowie *Changes* 1971

“Narrative…is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge.” Toni Morrison *Nobel Lecture December 1993*

**Michele Zamora**

University of California, Santa Barbara

michele\_zamora@ucsb.edu

**Daniel Gomez**

University of California, Santa Barbara

dgomez00@ucsb.edu

**Introduction**

Public opinion scholars, motivated by political socialization findings, largely consider youths under the age of 18 as an irrelevant demographic, citing their political opinions as unconstrained and irrational. However, there is an alternative narrative that views youths as rational political actors, with meaningful political opinions. The primary goal of this research is to better understand youth political behavior. The impetus that drives this research is rooted in the latter notion and compelled by three theoretical claims.

First, traditional political knowledge measurements may fail to accurately capture youth political behavior. Measuring respondents knowledge of political facts may be overlooking significant alternative ways in which young citizens process political information, especially through use of personal experience and narrative. Second, prior research has shown that issue salience can positively impact political behavior leading to early formation of political opinion and increased political participation. This may be especially relevant for youths in the domain of climate change, as evidenced by a rise in youth political engagement and participation. Finally, public opinion scholarship is rooted in an outdated concept of media dynamics. Increasingly, citizens – especially youths – prefer to use various social media rather than traditional institutional avenues to engage with politics. The ubiquitous nature of smart technology and the access this provides to information has been shown to increase political engagement, but requires a better understanding of how this operates.

Current research suggests that narrative through online discourse constructs a particular type of political identity that begins by working outside of institutions. We refer to this as *connective identity*, a term which combines traditional collective identity formation theory with new ideas surrounding the use of social media as a space of narrative identity construction. Our claim is that when young citizens are exposed to high political salience issues and are participating in online storytellingnarratives – as young political activists in a dynamic and unfolding social event – socialization processes are magnified and collective identities are created, impacting political behavior. Through a multi-disciplinary approach, bringing together theories of political science, social movements, and political communication, this study uses the Expanded Model of Citizen Competence (Cramer and Toff, 2017), connective action theory (Bennett and Segerberg 2013) and narrative identity theory (Polletta 1998), to clarify these three theoretical claims as they pertain to youth political behavior, dispel the myths surrounding youth political apathy, and aid in greater scholarly attention towards youth political impact on climate change policy.

**Literature Review**

*Measuring Preadult Political Knowledge*

By and large the political relevancy of Americans between the ages of 13 and 18 (referred to here as preadults), has been dismissed by scholars of public opinion. Scholarly consensus settles on the side that the late teens to the mid-twenties, 18-25 years of age approximately, are the “impressionable years" with attitudes and behavior stabilizing after this life-cycle period (Sears, 1983; Jennings, 1987; Sears and Funk, 1999). Studies also show that prior to age 15, political discourse is immature, political knowledge is inconsistent, and feelings of political efficacy are low (Adelson and O’Neil, 1966; Gallatin and Adelson, 1970; Niemi and Junn, 1998; Kahne et al., 2012). Therefore, public opinion scholars, motivated by political socialization conclusions, often overlook preadult political preferences and behavior as unformed, irrational, and irrelevant, rendering research on youth political behavior sparse. Perhaps most concerning, the underrepresentation of preadult voice further enforces the notion that America’s youth are civically unmotivated and politically disengaged contributing to preadult feelings of political inefficacy (Stoker and Bass, 2011; Robb, 2017). Youths themselves claim they are sorely underrepresented and misunderstood by societies political leaders, media outlets, and academia (Berents, 2016; Robb, 2017; Delegates, 2018). From the so-called “greatest generation” of robust civic virtues to the critically branded narcissistic, lazy, coddled, and delusional millennial generation, youths are categorically “denounced by their elders” (Dalton, 2009 p. 3).

There is an alternative narrative that views American youth as politically attentive, knowledgeable, and active (Dalton, 2009; Van Deth et al., 2011; Robb, 2017). Traditional measurements of political engagement, such as voting rates, campaign activity, protest participation, and factual political knowledge miss the ways the American public has changed. Successive generations are significantly altering their socio-political selves, becoming more educated, more tolerant of group diversity, and more democratically idealistic than previous generations (Zukin et al., 2006; Dalton, 2009; Parker et al., 2019). The last cohort to exhibit similar characteristics were the students who participated in the Freedom Summer project in 1964, which led to the sweeping youth protests in 1968 (McAdam 1990). Preadults have an interest in politics, a desire to understand political perspectives, and are actively seeking to politically engage (Stone, 2009; Pires, 2018). The incoming cohort may exhibit some fundamental generational changes in behavior as a result, perhaps changing what we think we know about youth political engagement, that requires reevaluating youth predisposition formation.

Some work traces stable political predispositions in adulthood all the way back to kindergartners (Block and Block, 2005). Others find coherent political opinions in older primary school children (Coles, 1986; Van Deth et al., 2011), and in preadults across countries (Xenos et al., 2014). Studies that uncover positive preadult political behavior have a common element: measurements of youth political knowledge transcend the traditional measurements of knowledge for adults. Instead of using standard fact-based measurements such as those developed by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) that gauge political knowledge as a set of “who, what, and where” in politics, these studies use alternative political tools to elucidate behavior outside of the dominant normative such as methods that measure reactions to political information and narratives of political experiences.

To further clarify, preadult political behavior may rightly be in the pre-formation phase and therefore unmeasurable by common standards. This may not indicate, however, that preadult political opinion is irrational and irrelevant as is often broadcast (Matthews, 2014), but that it is misunderstood. To expect young adults to understand complex political issues such as tax, budget, and health policy, or to be cognizant of current events, implies that at some point in the political socialization process, i.e. mature adulthood, these concepts will or should be clear to citizens. As is well documented, even American adults profoundly fail to meet these standards. (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Gass, 2015).

There is a growing understanding that citizens process political information through various means such as social groups, personal experience, and storytelling (Delli Carpini and Williams, 1994; Polletta 1998, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Lupia, 2016; Cramer and Toff, 2017). This research harkens back to early canonical concepts of public opinion as “pictures in people’s heads” (Lippman, 1922). Political opinion, according to this theory, is an amalgamation of various forms of knowledge where citizens “offer up opinions based on considerations that are relevant and salient to the context at hand” (Cramer and Toff, 2017, p. 766). While this is similar to Zaller’s (1992) RAS model, the difference lies in the conclusion: whereas Zaller asserts that knowledge sampling, or retrieval of salient information, is not indicative of political awareness or relevance, a growing number of scholars, including Cramer and Toff, push against this conclusion as a fully adequate picture of political behavior. Noting that even politically informed citizens often misrepresent factual information, and political elites also filter facts through personal experience, they urge researchers not to disregard experiential measures when assessing political awareness. Furthermore, by focusing on only traditional knowledge measurements, there arises a persistent social message that Americans are not capable of participating in politics, undermining democratic function (p. 767).

It becomes important, then, to reassess the ways in which political knowledge is gauged in assessing youth political engagement, and to provide scholars with a possible alternative toolkit for measuring political behavior. Cramer and Toff’s Expanded Model of Civic Competence does not substitute experience for facts, but calls for more inclusive types of “good citizenship” measurements, ones that incorporate experience *and* facts to gauge political knowledge, thereby demonstrating that preadults, despite what traditional measures indicate, are indeed politically engaged, rational, and relevant.

*Political Socialization: Salience and Participation*

Correctly measuring public opinion and political behavior may be of greater import with political areas of high salience. Political opinion formation is said to be a combination of political knowledge (discussed in preceding section), information (discussed in succeeding section), and socialization (Zaller, 1992). The four common sources, or agents, for preadult political socialization are family, school, peers, and media (Jennings and Niemi, 1974; Lee et al., 2013). Another recognized agent includes salient political events (Jennings and Niemi, 1974; Sears and Valentino, 1997; Polletta 1998; Passy and Monsch 2019). Salient political issues have been shown to motivate political action, shape political opinion, and change political behavior (Downs, 1972; McAdam 1990; Sears and Valentino, 1997; Polletta 1998; Marcus et al., 2000). Preadults’ political socialization can be greatly affected by a catalytic political event which provides a crucial "information flow during the socialization process" (Sears and Valentino, 1997, p. 47).

Salient political events catalyze socialization gains for preadults, bringing them closer to adult levels of crystallization through *affective bonding*, a merging of affect and cognition, (Sears and Valentino, 1997; Sears and Funk, 1999). Affect is increasingly shown to be significantly impactful on political behavior. Marcus et al., (2000) demonstrate that affect can occur *prior* to cognition when anxiety, say due to a salient political event, is triggered in the individual, leading citizens to reevaluate the political sphere and act to quell that anxiety.

Social movement theory also supports the idea that affect compels political participation. (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Polletta 1998; Rupp et al., 2017; Van Ness and Summers-Effler 2019). For example, Polletta finds that the self-ascribed emotional “spontaneity” of the 1960’s sit-in movement lowered the political risk of activism for young students. Studies of the sit-in movement typically cite bureaucratic organization, adult leadership, resource mobilization, and structured framing as mechanisms for sit-in success (Morris 1981; Robnett 1996). Polletta demonstrates that the rapid spread of sit-in activism for youths was partly the result of the ambiguous nature of the events that gave space for youths to create their own narrative around the social upheavals of the time. Interviews with students uncovered that, despite Morris’ persuasive theory of deep organizational ties with former activists, students saw themselves as acting outside of institutional constraints, motivated by moral duty and feelings of political efficacy. In this case, political salience compelled primarily black college students, who “could not but be affected by the association of student and activist that was occurring on a world historical stage” (p. 143) to participate in high-risk political behavior, challenging citizenship norms. High salience and affect provided young activists with the selective incentives they needed to overcome the participation costs of risky activism.

As discussed later, this facilitated the creation of a collective identity that impacted the success of the movement and created enduring political preferences. Consequentially, socialization effects occur *during* participation (Passy and Monsch 2019). Political activism has multiple impacts for participants: identities are formed, personal skills are developed, interpersonal networks expand that shape the activists mind, particularly their worldviews, oftentimes increasing future political participation. Importantly, activism impacts age cohorts in significant ways shaping significant cultural outcomes (McAdams 1990; Alwin et al., 1991; Jennings 2002).

Current preadult political interest appears to be increasing in areas of high political salience, demonstrated by the rise in youth activism when it comes to gun control, human rights, income inequality, media representation, and climate change (Robb, 2017; Pires, 2018). American citizens under the age of 18 are, indeed, participating in politics in various identifiable ways such as protest marches (*Associated Press*, 2018), contacting representatives (Witt, 2018), litigation (Zinser, 2017) and petitioning to lower the voting age to 16 ([Generation Citizen](https://generationcitizen.org/)). What is less clear, however, are the ways in which preadults engage in politics in other non-traditional ways such as social media sharing, sit-ins, and various non-institutional routes of addressing grievances. Are these issues crystallizing political opinions, and therefore increasing other types of participation, much like the youth of the protest generation? Until researchers attempt to gather opinion-formation data on preadults, this will remain merely speculative.

One highly salient political issue that is garnering a large amount of youth activism, and possibly prompting early formation of political opinion, is climate change. As with the broader public opinion literature, the dominant research on climate opinion, which mostly utilizes public polling data, largely ignores preadults as a sample demographic (see: Dunlap, 1978; Smith, 2002; Guber, 2003; Brewer, 2005; Brulle, 2012) likely due to the fact that polls do not ask youth their political opinions (for example: [Yale](http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/six-ten-americans-worried-global-warming/), [Gallup](https://news.gallup.com/poll/206030/global-warming-concern-three-decade-high.aspx?g_source=Politics&g_medium=lead&g_campaign=tiles), [NSEE](http://closup.umich.edu/files/ieep-nsee-2016-fall-carbon-tax.pdf), [PEW](http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/04/the-politics-of-climate/)). Current polling data on adult opinion indicate a level of climate knowledge incoherency. Meaning, that while a majority of adults believe climate change is happening, fewer than half believe it is anthropogenic in nature, even less believe there is a strong scientific consensus on the issue (Howe et al., 2015). Do preadults differ than adults regarding climate change opinions?

A recent Pew study (Parker et al., 2019) shows that 54% of preadults link human activity and climate change with numbers decreasing for those born before 1980, indicating that preadults differ than adults in how they perceive climate change, erring on the side of *greater* climate coherency for youths. Climate change education has been mostly shown to have little impact in convincing adult skeptics that climate change is a great risk caused by human activity (Jamieson 1996; Michaels and Monforton 2005; Carlisle et al., 2010; Kahan et al., 2011),[[1]](#footnote-1) but is much more effective with youths, especially when personal connection framing is used (Monroe et al., 2015; Stapleton, 2019). Furthermore, the argument that climate opinion is a proxy for ideology and not a matter of incoherent opinion may correlate with older adults, but seems to be less of a predictor for succeeding generations. Millennial conservatives are twice as likely than older generations to say that climate change is a serious concern and human caused and this trend is growing, suggesting that it is not a matter of ideology for youths (Stevenson et al., 2014; Funk and Hefferon, 2018). Recently, Republican House member Kevin McCarthy from California is one of many staunch climate skeptics that have begun to introduce legislation addressing climate change due to pressure from young suburban republican constituents (Mufson, 2020). Youths are exhibiting stark differences from older adults in the area of climate change but are being erroneously overlooked.

There is no doubt that preadults are formidable political players on the climate action scene. Teenagers are collectively and individually acting on climate justice issues ([Zero Hour](http://thisiszerohour.org/), [Greta Thunberg](https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)) creating a Green New Deal ([Sunrise Movement](https://www.sunrisemovement.org/)), fighting for indigenous environmental rights ([One Mind](https://www.omym.org/)), politically empowering climate change youth activists ([Earth Guardians](https://www.earthguardians.org/)) and suing the federal government ([Youth v Gov](https://www.youthvgov.org/)). Are salient political issues acting as a catalyst on preadults, affecting youth political engagement and motivating youth political action?

Current research suggests this is so. Measurements of youth political disengagement overlook alternative forms of engaged dissent and ignore the possibility that youths feel excluded from the dominant political realm and inefficacious in typical political environments (O’Brien et al., 2018). Whereas adult climate change activists via traditional engagement routes recount that climate change activism in the United States is slow-growing and challenging (McAdam, 2017), youths are experiencing a rise in collective action and are seeking opportunity to design their own climate action movement, outside of and in opposition to traditional institutional constraints (Foran et al., 2017). This is even more pronounced in the digital age, as discussed in the next section.

*Connective Identity: Information Acquisition and Narrative Construction*

For political events to have their catalytic effect, citizens require information exposure via social and communicative interaction with friends and family, at school, and through the media (Stoker and Bass, 2011). However, little is known about how the profoundly transformed and continually evolving media landscape affects political knowledge acquisition for a generation that has come of age in an era of both instant and diffuse information of questionable verity. Seminal work on public opinion treat the media as a traditionally centralized and trusted vehicle distributing the same pool of information to a vast majority of citizens (Zaller, 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Evidence shows successive generations increasingly rejecting traditional sources of news acquisition in favor of social media, especially YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook (Shearer and Gottfried, 2017; Smith and Anderson, 2018). This shift in the information environment has created a “new system [in which] communication and the interaction of public opinion and the political media are social and relational [creating] an era of informational interdependence” that requires further study (Shapiro and Jacobs, 2011). What is the relationship between youth political engagement, issue salience, and social media?

Literature on preadult political engagement and social media use offers mixed results. While some data show that social media is not a vehicle for latent youth political engagement (Keating and Melis, 2017) other studies show political engagement increases with time spent on social media platforms (Xenos et al., 2014). One experimental study demonstrated that social media, specifically a YouTube video that confirms global warming, increased climate issue salience. Specifically, as “number of views” increased, so did viewers perceptions on the salience of global warming (Spartz et al., 2017). Social media can offer mediated cues regarding social norms and “play an indirect role in catalyzing environmental behaviors” (Ibid, p. 4) thereby minimizing engagement, and possibly participation, costs. Most interestingly, while studies that define political participation as traditional (joining an organization, voting, campaign contributions) find lower levels of youth political activity, they also find significantly higher levels of activity for non-traditional forms of participation such as online sharing and discussion of information. Where 18.8% of respondents say they’ve joined a group interested in political issues, over 50% of respondents say they’ve posted political links and posted political comments (Keating and Melis, 2017).

The kind of media used is also important for understanding political behavior. Online social communication involving news and/or organizational activity is a better predictor of both traditional and non-traditional types of participation than either newspapers or television (Bakker and de Vreese 2011). Furthermore, Bakker and de Vreese find that, contrary to popular conceptions, even non-news online activity, such as entertainment, impacts “diverse forms of participation” for youths (p. 465). This important distinction will be discussed in the last section.

Studies show that working outside of institutions matters for the changing American citizen. Current political power struggles foment institutional dysfunction resulting in diminished representation and sub-optimal governing (Binder 2003; Mann and Ornestein 2013). Youths are seeking alternative engagement opportunities and digital platforms provide this opportunity specifically because it is a way for grievances to be aired outside of the dysfunctional institutional structure. Increasingly, participatory mobilization occurs as a result of personal networks and social communication rather than strong formal organizational ties, challenging rooted notions of collective action (Crossley 2015; Fisher 2018).

Bennett and Segerberg (2013) distinguish between the classic logic of collective action (Olson 1965) and the less familiar logic of connective action. In doing so, they make clear that digital platforms provide a fluid, dynamic, easily accessible space to address political concerns that lie outside of the constraints found in the institutional avenues described by Olson. Whereas Olson’s logic of collective action requires a serious evaluation of costs and benefits that, unless highly attractive individual incentives are available, will likely result in the choice to avoid participation and “free-ride,” connective action costs are relatively low. However, Bennett and Segerberg’s argument focuses on digital media as an organizational mechanism that allows citizens to overcome collective action costs, including the high costs associated with framing collective identities. In this sense the need for core identities shared by large groups to drive social movements is replaced by technological openness, allowing individuals to frame their participation and membership on their own terms. Meaning, in their logic of connective action model collective identities become epiphenomenal.

The logic of connective action claims that mobilization occurs because of fluid, individualized networks “that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 750) because of the use of collective action frames, but social movement scholars disagree. Much attention has been given to how social movements overcome costly collective action dilemmas, and the consensus is that collective identity is crucial for large-scale mobilization. Polletta (1998) argues that subsuming collective identity into framing mechanisms miss important features of social movement activity. Namely, the important function that collective identity construction provides, especially “during periods of ongoing or potential social transformation” to mobilize citizens to action and to provide constraints in times of socio-political uncertainties (p. 141-2). Actors must be drawn in and persuaded to participate while also provided with tools to “make sense of unfamiliar events” (p. 143).

Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier’s model of collective identity (1992) highlight three overlapping processes of identity construction. First, group members must be cognizant of their unique place in society through an identification of particular boundaries, or constraints. Second, a shared consciousness, or interconnectedness must be developed. Third, the group identifies a politicization of the quotidian through some kind of power struggle. Without the construction of collective identity, the mass mobilizations documented by Bennett and Segerberg are unlikely to overcome the classic collective action problems Olson describes. While collective framing is certainly a tool used by digital activists, the construction of that framing has likely occurred prior to connective action. Online sharing of stories, or narratives, appear to provide access to connective action tools while also dynamically constructing the collective identity necessary for mobilization.

Polletta’s theory of narrative identity (1998) is distinct from the classic conception of collective identity in that emplotment – using narrative to process, adjust, and make sense of ongoing uncertainties – is critical for development. In this sense, not only do we shape the narratives, we are also being shaped by the narratives we’ve created. It is the quality of social discord in which narrative use arises and operates, providing an allowance for existing in and decoding social upheavals (Freshwater and Rolfe 2004). Narrative identity also aligns with Taylor and Whittier’s collective identity model. First, narratives allow for groups to comprehend and unravel complex social situations. Through shared stories about experiences, especially in times of social upheaval, participants are able to engage in consciousness-raising (Whittier 2017) where individuals gradually identify as part of a group that have similar experiences around socially significant events. Second, these experiences are widely diffused, say through social media sharing, publicizing *and* politicizing experiences, raising the salience of a group or issue. Third, through narrative sharing and diffusion, group members conceive of themselves as uniquely positioned in society, adding a “normative dimension of participation” (p. 143) that creates the selective incentives needed to overcome participation costs. Identity, so it seems, is crucial for mobilization (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Crossley 2015).

Our claim is that when young citizens are exposed to high political salience issues and are participating in online storytellingnarratives – as young political activists in a dynamic and unfolding social event – socialization processes are magnified and collective identities are created, impacting political behavior. *Connective identity* builds upon Taylor and Whittier’s model of collective identity and combines the logic of connective action with theory of narrative identity, bridging the gap between narrative story-making and collective action. Connective identity is the formation of collective identity through online social narrative discourse. Especially for younger generations, social politics is not only about information acquisition but also information sharing so that the digital space can all at once satisfy the political grievance, act as a vehicle for political participation, and shape identity, resulting in greater feelings of political efficacy.

Connective Identity Model

**Dynamic Unfolding Social Events**

Changing Citizenship Norms

High Salience Political Events

Changing Technology

**Formation of Connective Identity**

*Connective Identity and Social Change: The Big Picture*

Exploring alternative media sources as spaces of political sharing and shaping may also change what we think we know about political knowledge, awareness, and action. Social media is routinely perceived as a source of entertainment, rather than a source for public affairs or news (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001) and often seen as the bane of political knowledge acquisition (Prior 2005; Bartels 2016). Challenging Prior’s (2005) assertion that when citizens opt-in for entertainment they are opting-out of participatory behavior, Bakker and de Vreese (2011) find that for young citizens online forums and entertainment surfing had a positive impact on all kinds of political participation, both traditional and non-traditional. Others find that entertainment provides a different space for certain types of knowledge acquisition, especially in the realm of mediated political experience and shared “socio-climactic imaginaries” (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Milkoreit 2017, p. 5). Interactions with climate fiction, Milkoreit claims, provide societies the ability to actively deliberate their collective imaginations that may enable resilience and sustenance, thereby aiding in actuation of social change.

Furthermore, future imagining is an inherently political act, shaped by those that have lain claim to the trajectory of the political system. Therefore, one postulated reason for the lack of attention to environmental issues and the slow political reaction to (even denial of) climate crises is the result of the imaginaries of those in power. Social media and entertainment, then, offer up an alternative experience, one that is shared and communally empowering, rather than merely distractive. For example, a former student in an Introduction to American Politics class sent the following message at the end of the quarter, demonstrating both the ability to process entertainment through a political lens and the willingness to share that experience:

“I was wondering if you got a chance to see Incredibles 2? It has some interesting political views and it was crazy because a lot of it was relevant to the topics we discussed in class (especially about collective action, social inequality, and government authority).”

Diana Mutz’s piece *Harry Potter and the Deathly Donald* (October 2016) demonstrates that "fictional stories can influence political opinions" (722). For those not familiar with the series, it is a fictional story about a young wizard boy, Harry Potter, and his friends who must ultimately battle a dark wizard who seeks absolute power and domination. The book series follows the community over a seven-year period imbued with classic themes of good vs. evil, much in the vein of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Mutz highlights the overt political messaging presented in the Harry Potter (HP) series as influential on specific areas of opinion formation (723). The results of the data Mutz examines indicate that readers of the HP series exhibit negative attitudes towards Donald Trump, higher levels of tolerance for outgroups, an aversion to authoritarianism, and opposition to punitive (particularly violent) policies (724-5). Mutz asks us to ponder the possibility "that a fictional story may have implications for general election preferences" and more importantly that "[t]he underlying message is that love is stronger than death [and is] required to resist" the bleak political future (728).

In light of this information it becomes critical to consider social media usage, even when it appears to be apolitical, as politically consequential. While this certainly creates a far more complex arena of public opinion formation, we argue that it is necessary to take a fine-grain approach in order to elucidate what may be the transitional stages of major social change.

**Conclusion**

Public opinion scholarship may be overlooking a very significant portion of the political demography: our American youth. While most public opinion studies operate under the assumption that youth political opinion is irrelevant, both academic research and contemporary events suggest this may be an erroneous assumption. Current research is pushing against traditional measurements of political knowledge rooted only in factual information, and urging a more inclusive methodology that takes into account experiential and narrative measurements. This alternative approach broadens definitions of political knowledge, thereby contributing to a greater concept of political awareness and efficacy. This is especially significant when assessing youths as political actors, a demographic often labelled as politically apathetic.

Changing this narrative may also encourage feelings of greater political efficacy and expanded political action. The youth climate change movement demonstrates that preadults are, indeed, politically aware and engaged. Climate change may be acting as a political socialization agent, crystallizing political opinions earlier in life than socialization scholars deem normal. Additionally, more work needs to be done to assess current socio-political impacts on the incoming cohort, and the future impacts they will have on our socio-political spaces. Through a combined lens of connective action and narrative identity, termed *connective identity*,we may have the methodological and theoretical tools to examine these dynamic and fluid events. The changing media landscape as well as the ubiquity of information-ready devices may be catalyzing political opinion and providing youths with tools for political engagement and action. Whereas youth’s use of technology is often seen as an agent of political *dis*engagement, studies show that digital platforms can and do often increase political engagement, participation, and activism.

Currently, preadults feel misrepresented and neglected by academic research and the media, while at the same time there are indications that they are politicized at an earlier age than previous generations. Paying direct attention to preadult opinion formation, especially in a salient domain such as climate change, and their experience with various types digital platforms is a critically undervalued area in public opinion scholarship. Understanding this burgeoning generations predisposition formation and how that formation affects political opinions can assist public opinion scholars in revising assumptions regarding information effects and gain insight into future political behavior.

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1. For one study that demonstrates a positive correlation between increased climate knowledge and decreased climate skepticism see Ranney and Clark (2016) “Climate Change Conceptual Change: Scientific Information Can Transform Attitudes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)