

# Youth and Participation Beyond Elections<sup>1</sup>

By Russell J. Dalton

Sylvia is a senior citizen who lives in Orange County, California. She is deeply interested in politics and votes in every election after studying the candidates and propositions on the ballot. Moreover, she continues her activity between elections. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday she rises at 6AM to call the White House to leave her comments for the president on the issues of the day. On Tuesday and Thursday she either calls her senators from California or the leadership of the House or Senate.

Alix lives in northern California. She switched shampoos over animal testing, and will not buy clothes produced by child labor. She yells at people who do not recycle. During her last year in high school she helped organize a protest over the genocide in the Sudan that raised \$13,000 for Darfur relief. All this was before she was even eligible to vote.

These two individuals show some of the diverse ways in which Americans are politically active. Participation means more than just voting. As previous chapters have argued, a participatory public has been a defining feature of American politics and historically a strength of the political system. Social scientists maintain that political participation “is at the heart of democratic theory and at the heart of the democratic political formula in the United States”.<sup>1</sup> Without public involvement in the process, democracy lacks both its legitimacy and its guiding force.

In the 1960s and 1970s Americans were actively engaged in voluntary associations, interested in politics, and involved in political discussion. Turnout in presidential elections reached a modern highpoint in the 1960s.

Despite this heritage, many contemporary political analysts believe that the foundations of citizenship and democracy in America are crumbling.<sup>2</sup> Numerous pundits and political analysts proclaim that too few of us are voting, we are disconnected from our fellow citizens, we lack social capital, and we are losing faith in our government.

Moreover, as seen in the previous chapters of this book, many analysts view the young as a primary source of this decline.<sup>3</sup> Authors from Tom Brokaw to Robert Putnam extol the civic values and engagement of the older, ‘greatest generation’ with great hyperbole. At the same time, the young are described as the ‘doofus generation’ or the ‘invisible generation,’ even by sympathetic political observers. These analysts see young Americans as dropping out of politics, producing the erosion of political activity.

Is the situation really so dire? We agree that the American public has undergone profound changes in the past half-century, and this has changed participation patterns and citizens’ relationship with government. However, this essay argues that prior studies misdiagnosed the situation by focusing on only a portion of political activity, and by mistaking the sources of these changes. Many non-electoral forms of political participation have been increasing, especially among the young. Cliff Zukin and his colleagues recently surveyed political action among the young, and they rejected the general claim of youth disengagement: “First and foremost, simple claims that today’s youth . . . are apathetic and disengaged from civic life are simply wrong.”<sup>4</sup> This description is starkly different from the decline in political participation literature.

Many political causes motivate today’s youth, such as helping the less fortunate in America, addressing poverty in Africa (and America), improving the global (and American) environment, as well as addressing their own political and economic needs. Consequently, Americans are changing their style of political action rather than dropping out from politics entirely--and these trends are most apparent

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among the young. From this perspective, America is witnessing a change in the nature of citizenship and political participation that can lead to a renaissance of democratic participation--rather than a general decline.

This essay first examines how political participation patterns are changing over time. Then, we describe how the participation patterns differ across generations, as younger Americans turn to alternative non-electoral forms of action. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings.

### **What Could You Do to Influence the Government?**

Instead of starting with the common assumption that participation is synonymous with voting in elections, let's begin with a citizen-centered view of participation. How do people think of their participation options? If one wants to influence politics, how should this be done? Answers to this question reflect a combination of which tools the individual thinks will be effective, and what they feel prepared to do.

As the examples at the start of this chapter show, people can be politically active in many ways, and our understanding of contemporary politics has to have an inclusive (and changeable) definition of what is political. And you might see your own connection to politics as very different from these two people. To go beyond these two individuals, public opinion surveys have asked people about their participation options:

Suppose a regulation was being considered by (your local community) which you considered very unjust or harmful; what do you think you could do? Suppose a law was being considered by Congress which you considered to be very unjust or harmful: what do you think you could do?

This question was first asked in 1959, and most Americans felt they could affect politics; only 18 percent said they could do nothing about a bad local regulation and only 22 percent said they could do nothing about a bad national law. When this question was repeated in the 1980s, the percentage who said they could do nothing held stable for local politics, and decreased by another 7 percent for national politics. This is a first suggestion that political engagement is not decreasing in America. We suspect a more recent survey would find people even more engaged.

The expanding forms of political action are even more apparent in responses to how people would try to influence the government. Many people say they would work with through informal groups, neighbors or friends to influence policy, especially at the local level where the possibility of face-to-face cooperation is greater. This is the type of collective action that represents Tocqueville's image of participation in America. Although responses are slightly less frequent in 1981, this remains a common form of proposed political action.<sup>5</sup>

By the second time point, participation means more avenues of influence. In 1959, protests, demonstrations, petitions and other examples of contentious politics were barely mentioned by 1 percent of the public. In 1981, 33 percent mention some direct action related to local government and 16 percent for national government. Most of these responses involved signing of petitions, but a substantial percentage also cited protests, demonstrations and boycotts as a means of political influence.

The tendency to think of political influence as direct contacting has grown even more over this time span. Both contacting a local government official or a national government official have increased by more than 20 percent across these two decades. Direct contacting becomes the most frequently proposed method of political action for local government (55 percent) and national government (84 percent). This trend reflects two reinforcing patterns. First, people today are less deferential to elites and more likely to assert their own political views. Second, more people possess the resources and skills to take direct, individual action, such as writing a letter to an official or calling their office.

This question about methods of influence also illustrates the role of voting. In 1959, voting or working with a party was the third most frequently cited means of influence for both local and national government. The percentages citing elections and parties did not change dramatically in the next two

decades--but other forms of action expanded. Voting is very important, but citizens are now much more likely to say they would turn to other methods when trying to influence government.

These findings are now a bit dated, however. In the modern context of email and faxes, direct contacting has become even simpler for the individual.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, new forms of internet-based participation have emerged as a result of technological change. And protest campaigns have expanded to include new forms of political consumerism and online activism. The boundaries of political action are now much wider than they were a few decades ago.

In summary, people see expanding options for how they can influence government. Moreover, the growth in the participation repertoire has come primarily in forms of direct action--such as contacting and protest--that typify a style of participation that is much different from the institutionalized and infrequent means of electoral participation. If more recent data were available, we suspect these trends would be even stronger.

### **The Trends in Political Participation Beyond Voting**

American citizens see new avenues of political action available to them--but do they use these opportunities? Comprehensive longitudinal data on the participation patterns of Americans are surprisingly rare.<sup>7</sup> Most academic longitudinal studies examine only one aspect of political participation over time. Furthermore, even when a survey includes a large set of participation items, the question wording often varies, which limits our ability to compare surveys. Consequently, there is no single definitive source for data on American participation patterns over the last several decades, and thus we must combine a variety of sources to track activity patterns.

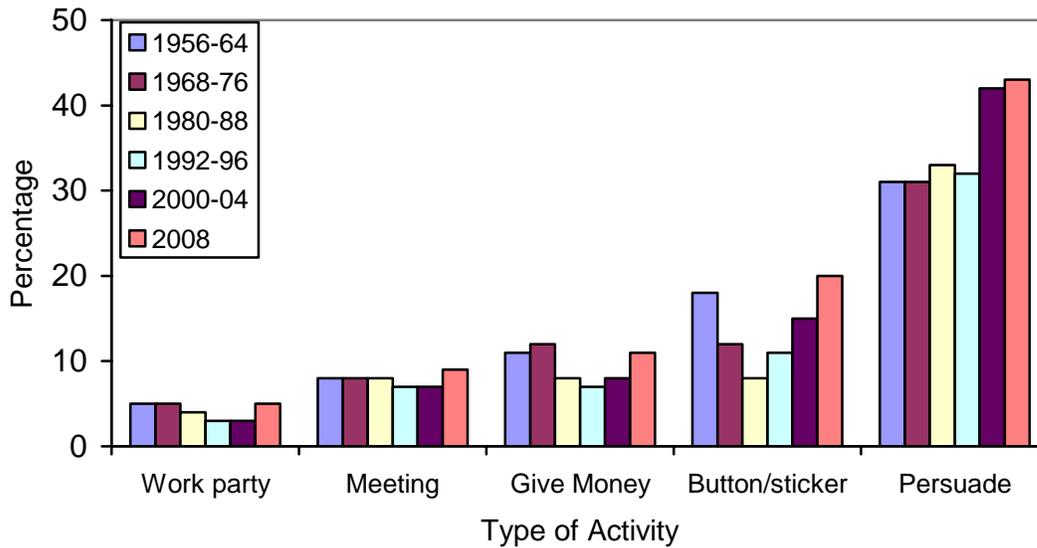
We want to start our analyses as early as possible in order to describe patterns before the point in the early 1970s when previous research claims that participation generally began to erode. Moreover, with a long time span we can better see the long term consequences of social change in the American public, which can be separated from the ebb and flow of specific events or specific election campaigns. Since the previous section of this book discussed voting trends, we focus on five other types of participation that partially overlap with the subsequent chapters in this section: participation in campaigns, involvement in community groups, contacting political figures, various forms of contentious political action, and Internet-based activism.

**Campaign Activity.** Participation in campaigns can be an exciting activity. People debate about the nation's future, learn new skills in educating others how to vote, and attending a good campaign rally can be better than a night at the movies. Imagine all the young volunteers in Iowa in 2007-08 who now have a picture with Obama in their Facebook photo album.

Fewer people are routinely active in campaigns, however, because this requires more initiative, more time, and arguably more political sophistication than the act of voting. Yet campaign activity can do more to influence political outcomes than voting, in part because one is influencing other voters. Campaign activities are also important to parties and candidates; candidates generally are more sensitive to, and aware of, the policy interests of their activists. Several analysts argue, however, that campaign activity has followed a downward spiral in parallel to voting turnout.<sup>8</sup>

The American National Election Study (ANES) has the most extensive time trends on campaign activity (Figure 1). The ANES asks about working for a party, going to a meeting, giving money, displaying campaign material, and persuading others how to vote. There are ebbs and flows in campaign involvement related to specific campaigns, with a slight downward drift in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Displaying a campaign button or a bumper sticker was popular in the 1950s and early 1960s, but one suspects that in contemporary elections more people forward election related emails and display voting preferences through their Facebook affiliations than place placards on their lawn. Moreover, campaign activity has increased in the last few elections, even before the historic 2008 elections. In summary, campaign activity has ebbed and flowed over this half century period—and participation in election campaigns still engages a significant share of the American public.

**Figure 1 Trend in American Campaign Activity**



*Source:* American National Election Study 1956-2008.

**Group Activity.** The wellspring of democracy, according to Tocqueville, was Americans' involvement in their communities. Communal participation can take many forms. It often involves group efforts to deal with social or community problems, ranging from issues of schools or roads to protecting the local environment. From the PTA to local neighborhood watch committees, this is democracy in action. The existence of such autonomous group action defines the character of a civil society that democratic theorists consider a foundation of the democratic process. Today, participation in citizen groups can include involvement in public interest groups with broad policy concerns, such as environmental interest groups, women's groups, or consumer protection.

Group based participation has long been cited as a distinctive aspect of the American political culture, but it is difficult to measure without representative survey data. Several political participation studies have asked people if they had worked with others in their community to solve some local problem; 30 percent were active in 1967 and this increased to 34 percent in 1987.<sup>10</sup> A 2004 survey asked about community activity in only the last five years, and 36 percent reportedly working a community project. Similarly, the World Values Survey found that American membership in civic associations, environmental groups, women's groups, or peace groups increased from 6 percent in 1980, to 18 percent in 1990, to 33 percent in 1999.

These activities are perhaps the closest to the Tocquevillian image of grassroots democracy in America, thus it is very significant that informal collective action has become more common among Americans.

**Contacting About Politics.** Another type of political action is personally contacting a politician, government official or the media about a political issue. This is a fairly demanding form of action, requiring that the individual identify a target and formulate a statement of their policy preferences. Sidney Verba and Norman Nie studied participation in 1967, and found a fifth of the public had contacted a member of the local government or the state/national government. When they repeated the survey in 1987, a third of the public had contacted politicians at both levels.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, other evidence suggests that more and more people use this method of individualized participation, which allows them to select the issue, the timing and means of communication, and the content of the message to policy makers.<sup>12</sup> A century ago, active citizens marched en masse to the polls with their ballots held high over the heads, and

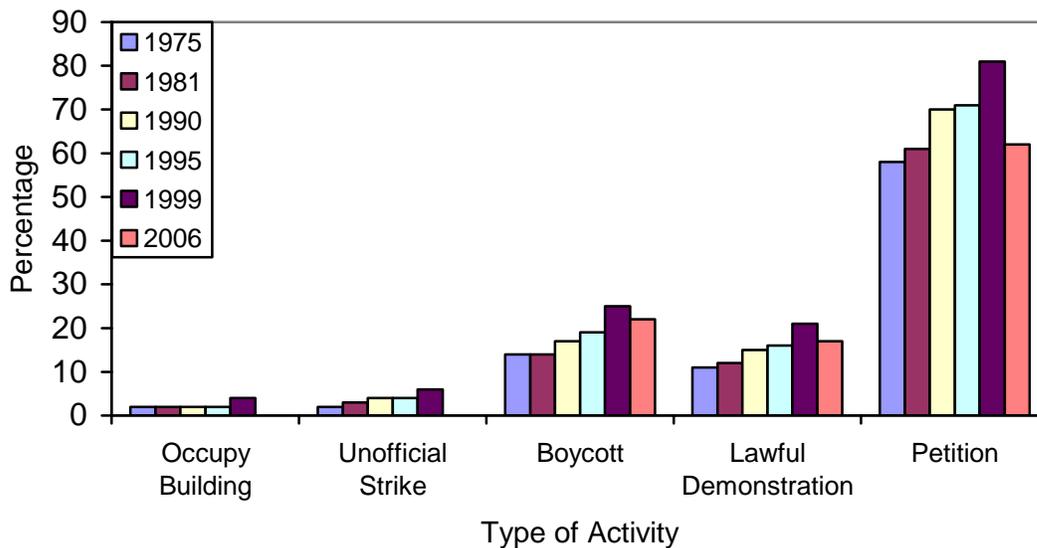
voted as their ward captain or union leader told them. Today, they sit in the comfort of their home and write politicians about the issues of the community and the nation.

**Contentious Participation.** Protest is another form of participation. Protest not only expands the repertoire of political participation, but it is a style of action that differs markedly from electoral politics. Protest can focus on specific issues or policy goals--from protecting whales to protesting the policies of a local government--and can convey a high level of political information with real political force. Voting and campaign work seldom focus on a single issue because parties represent a package of policies. Sustained and effective protest is a demanding activity that requires initiative, political skills, and cooperation with others. Thus, the advocates of protest argue that citizens can increase their political influence by adopting a strategy of direct action.

Although protest and similar forms of action are part of democratic politics, early participation surveys did not ask these items. This partially reflected the low level of protest in the 1950s and early 1960s, as well as the contentious nature of these activities. The 1967 Verba/Nie participation survey, for instance, did not include a question on protest--even though it occurred in the midst of one of the most turbulent periods of modern American history. In the 1987 survey, 6 percent said they had participated in a demonstration, protest or boycott in the past two years.<sup>13</sup> More than a decade later (2004), 7 percent said they had participated in a protest in the past five years.

Another survey series has asked about participation in several types of contentious action (Figure 2).<sup>14</sup> In the mid-1970s about half of Americans said they had signed a petition; now this is about three-quarters of the public. Participation in demonstrations, boycotts and unofficial strikes have roughly doubled over this time span. This series may exaggerate the trend in protest because it asks if the respondent had ever participated in these activities, instead of asking about participation over a discrete timespan. However, if we could extend our timeseries back to the quieter times of the 1950s and early 1960s, the growth of protest activity would undoubtedly be dramatic. Protest has become so common that is now the extension of conventional political action by other means.

**Figure 2 Trend in American Protest Activity**



Source: 1975 Political Action Study and World Values Survey, 1981-2006

Note: The questions on occupying buildings and unofficial strikes were not asked in 2006.

If we expand the definition of protest to include political consumerism, the increase in contentious politics is even more dramatic.<sup>15</sup> Political consumerism--buying or boycotting a product for a political reason--appears to be an increasingly common activity in most contemporary democracies, and something missing from earlier participation studies. The 2005 CDACS Survey found that roughly a fifth of Americans reported boycotting or buying a product for political reasons or ethnical reasons in the previous 12 months.<sup>16</sup> Political consumerism is at the border of politics and economics, but it has been effective in stimulating political change in areas ranging from treatment of third world labor to animal rights issues, to the certification of free trade coffee in your nearest coffee house.

Thus, most people in established democracies participate in some form of contentious action, if only by signing a petition. Participation in stronger forms of protest—such as participating in a lawful demonstration or joining a boycott—actually rivals the levels of campaign activity.

**Wired Activism.** Finally, the Internet provides a new way for people to do traditional political activities: to connect with others, to gather and share information, and to attempt to influence the political process. For instance, people are now more likely to send an email to an elected official or a media outlet than to mail a traditional letter through the U.S. Post Office. While websites were unheard of in the early 1990s, they are now a standard and expanding feature of electoral politics. A wide range of political groups, parties and interest groups use the Internet to disseminate information. The 2005 CDACS survey, for example, found that 17 percent of Americans had visited a political website in the previous year to gain political information. The blogosphere is another new source of political information that potentially empowers individuals as a rival to the established media. The Internet can also be a source of political activism that occurs electronically through online petitions or cyberprotests. There are even experiments in Internet voting.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the Internet is creating new political opportunities that had not previously existed. For instance, Moveon.org became a vital tool to connect like-minded individuals during the 2004 Democratic primaries. The Obama campaign brought this to a new level in the 2008 election, when their website became a source of information on the campaign, a potent tool for fundraising, and a means for individuals to connect to other Obama supporters through their own social networking site (MyBo). The potential of the Internet is also illustrated on MySpace, Facebook and other social networking sites where people communicate and can link themselves to affinity groups that reflect their values as a way to meet other like-minded individuals.

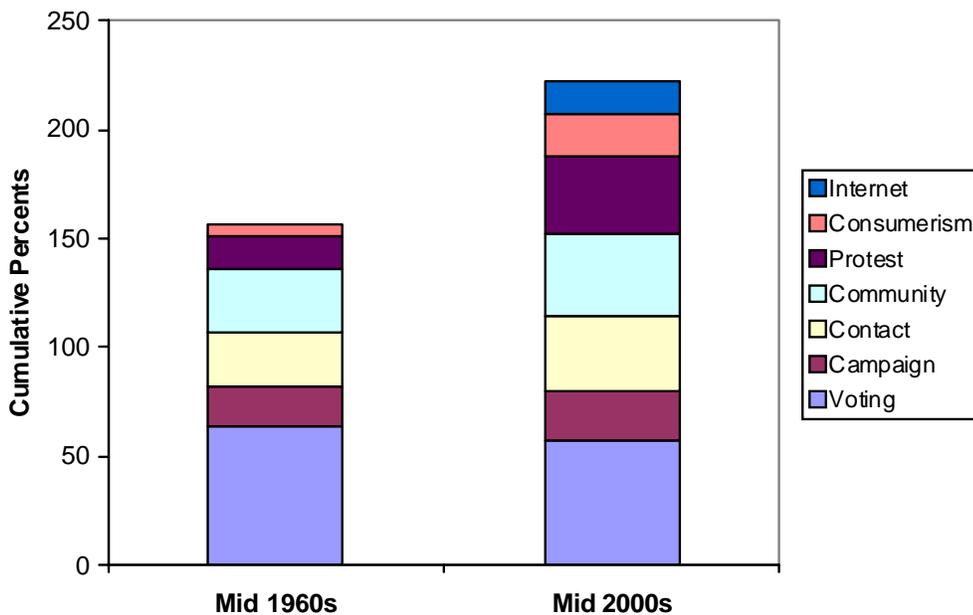
A number of recent surveys document the growing political activity on the Internet. The 2005 CDACS survey found that 17 percent of Americans had visited a political website in the past year, 13 percent had forwarded a political email, and 7 percent had participated in other political activities over the Internet. Those who had done any of these activities exceeded the percent who had donated money to a political group, worked for a party or candidate, or displayed campaign materials over the same time period. The 2008 Pew Internet Survey found that significant minorities had done some political activity online (such as signing an e-petition or forwarding political emails), had used social networking for some form of social or political engagement, and made political contributions online.<sup>18</sup> The numbers are still modest, and the uses are still growing, but the Internet is adding to the tools of political activism, especially among the young.

## **Participation Now and Then**

It is clear that Americans now have access to an expanding range of different forms of political action. Moreover, such patterns have become institutionalized as the structure of political process has changed to accommodate a more participatory public. Governments now reach out to engage their citizens in new ways, and some citizens—though not all—are making use of these opportunities. For instance, the 2008 Pew Internet Survey estimated that two-thirds of the American public had performed at least one political activity in the previous year, even excluding voting!<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, there is not a single pair of surveys or other data source that documents all these changes in the framework of participation. Yet we can assemble suggestive evidence from the above discussion to illustrate how the total activity of the public has changed across time. The first column in Figure 3 displays the patterns of participation described by the classic Verba/Nie participation study and other participation studies in the mid-1960s, when political activity was supposedly at its modern highpoint. About three-fifths of the public voted in the presidential elections of the 1960s, a fifth were active in presidential election campaigns, a quarter had contacted political officials, and a third were active in their community. This was the idyllic image of participatory America.

**Figure 3 Estimate of Changing Cumulative Participation over Time**



*Source:* Estimates by the author.

Four decades later, the situation has changed. Turnout in presidential elections has decreased by a few percentage points, which stimulated concerns about a disengaged public. But the best available evidence suggests that other forms of action have held steady or increased—and new forms of action have been added to the participatory repertoire. Just as many people are active in political campaigns based on the American National Election Studies. Several studies indicate that direct political contacting has increased, as well as community activity. In addition, political protest has dramatically grown from an unconventional and infrequent form of action to an extension of normal politics by other means. In a typical year, up to a third of the American public reports signing a petition, participating in a demonstration, or some other contentious action. In addition, political consumerism and internet activism now have broadened the agenda of action, each involving 15-20 percent of Americans on an annual basis.

Again, these are suggestive estimates rather than precise calculations based on identical survey data from each timepoint, but the trend is obvious. Political participation in America has expanded over this timespan. The total activity of the American public is now more than a third greater than in the 1960s. Equally important, the patterns of action have also changed significantly.

## Youth and Changing Participation Patterns

The explanation for changing participation patterns is complex, and many factors are involved. It partially reflects the growing political skills and resources of the citizenry, as education levels have risen and access to political information has increased. It partially reflects technological changes, such as the importance of television in informing the public and the growth of the Internet. Both of these technologies have had positive and negative consequences on the nature of political discourse. In addition, the growth of self-expressive values encourages participation in activities that are citizen initiated, directly linked to government, and more policy oriented.<sup>20</sup> In short, changing skills and norms encourage Americans to engage in more demanding and more assertive means of political action.

Age is another factor that is typically linked to participation patterns. Since the advent of public opinion research, studies have routinely found that young people are less interested in politics and less likely to participate in elections. Then political involvement increases as individuals establish careers, begin raising families, and become integrated into their communities. This is generally known as the ‘life cycle model’ of participation (see chapter 1 in this book).

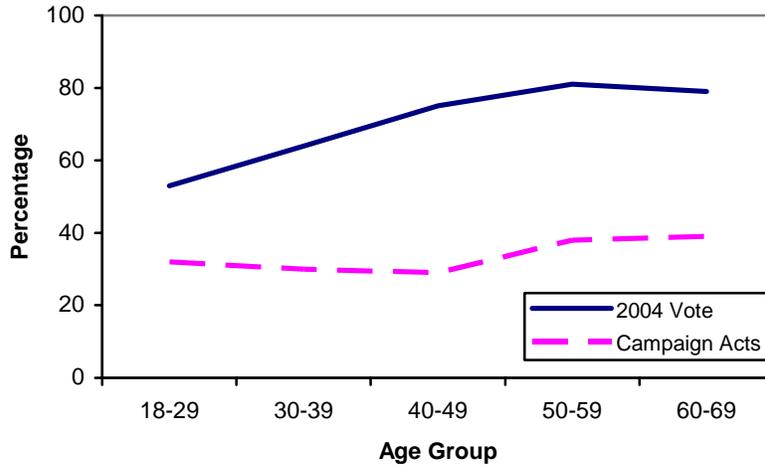
Based on such age patterns, and especially the declining levels of electoral participation among the young over time, several scholars have argued that youth are dropping out of politics. The criticisms of youth, and the perils for democracy, are often harshly stated as reflected in many of the contributions to this volume.

However, there is also a generational aspect to age differences in political participation. Generations are the carriers of these changing experiences and social conditions. Younger Americans are better educated than their grandparents, and more likely to have self-expressive values that lead to more challenging forms of action. Generational are also raised in different political conditions with different norms about politics. Younger generations have become more critical of political parties and elected politicians, and thus are less attracted to conventional electoral politics. Thus, some alternative forms of non-electoral participation appear especially appealing to young people. In contrast, research routinely proclaims that electoral politics is the domain of older Americans.

The complication, therefore, is that participation patterns across age groups reflect a combination of life cycle and generational effects. When life cycle and generational effects are reinforcing—such as for voting or belonging to a political party—older Americans are more likely to participate. However, in other instances a generational shift toward non-electoral forms of participation among the young may be so strong that it may lessen or even reverse the normal life cycle pattern. Thus, rather than generalize about the overall political disengagement of youth based primarily on electoral participation, we need to compare patterns across the full range of possible political activities.

Our age comparisons are based on the 2005 CDACS survey that included the largest number of participation items in a recent nationally-representative in-person survey.<sup>21</sup> As benchmark, we begin by comparing age groups in their electoral participation. Figure 4 presents the patterns of voting and party activity for five age groups beginning with those under age thirty. The top line in the figure displays the familiar pattern of significantly lower voting turnout among the young, and then increasing with age. In this survey, there is a 26 percentage point difference in turnout between 18-29 year olds versus people in their sixties. Similarly, a summary of campaign activity—working for a candidate, displaying a button or sticker, or contributing money—shows a slight increase with age. These age differences reflect the general pattern of lower electoral engagement among the young. Moreover, other studies have shown that age differences in turnout have increased over time, which implies that more than just a basic life cycle pattern is involved.

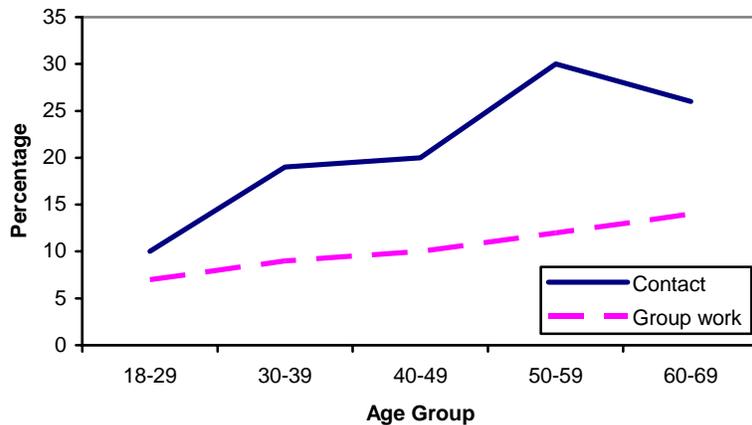
**Figure 4. Age Differences in Electoral Activity**



Source: 2005 CDACS Survey.

Beyond electoral politics, some of the most common political activities involve contacting officials on political matters and working with a group on a political topic. Figure 5 indicates that both of these forms of political activity are more common among older Americans, a pattern consistent with a life cycle increase in political involvement. Furthermore, Martin Wattenberg compares participation in community groups across three surveys (1967-1987-2002) and finds that all age groups have become more active by roughly the same margin.<sup>22</sup> However, he finds that contacting has grown disproportionately among older Americans over time, with young people remaining constant in this activity between 1967 and 2004.

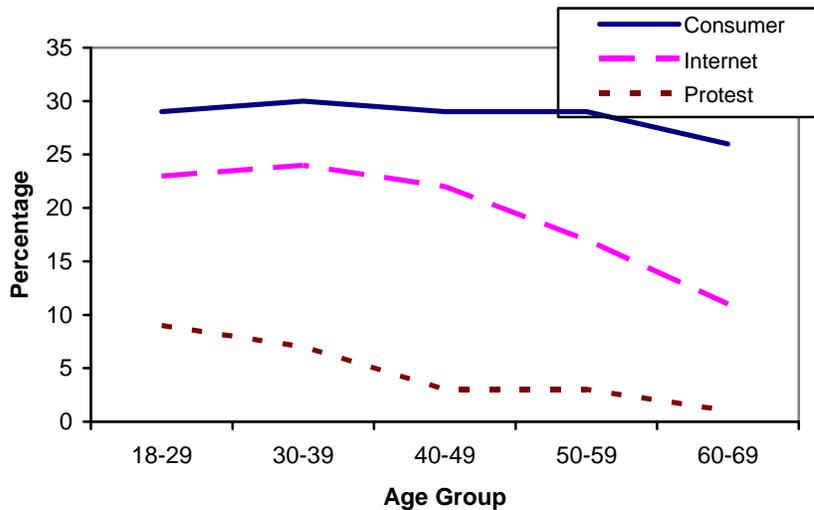
**Figure 5. Contacting and Working with a Group by Age**



Source: 2005 CDACS Survey.

Figure 6 shows examples of more contentious and elite-challenging participation options—and they follow a much different pattern. The lower line in the figure displays the percentage who has participated in either a legal or illegal protest in the past year. While this is a relatively infrequent activity on an annual basis, it is still several times more common among the young than among the oldest cohort. Furthermore, there is evidence that this age pattern reflects generational changes, with younger Americans today more likely to use this method when compared to their parents' generation.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the middle line is the percentage who has used the Internet in one of three political activities (visiting a political website, forwarding political messages, or participating in Internet-based political activities). Here the contrast between the youngest and oldest age groups is the clearest. The top line displays the percentage of each age group that has boycotted a product or bought a product for political reasons or ethnic reasons in the past year. This activity is also slightly more common among the younger two age groups.

**Figure 6. Unconventional Action by Age**



*Source:* 2005 CDACS Survey.

These age patterns across different activities thus fail to show a consistent decline in participation among the young, and instead suggest that social and political changes are transforming the way younger people are linked to politics. Fewer young people vote, but they are more likely to volunteer, protest or connect to politics through the web—and all of these methods were often overlooked by studies of traditional forms of political participation. Furthermore, there are substantial differences even among those under age thirty. For instance, the better-educated youth and those with more assertive norms of citizenship accentuate these trends—with higher levels of protest, political consumerism, Internet-based activism, and even participation in more conventional forms. Thus social change affects young people differently depending on their own political skills and norms.

### **Engaged Democrats**

Some of the leading political experts in the United States have asserted that Americans are disengaging from the political process, which may undermine the bases of American democracy. John Hibbing and

Elisabeth Theiss-Morse claim that Americans have become politically disengaged and want to stay that way: “The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decision-making process.”<sup>24</sup> This theme is vividly represented by many of the contributions to this book.

This chapter has argued that the reality of American politics is much different. Few members of Congress, for instance, complain that they receive less input from their constituents than in the past; few government administrators yearn for a lobbyist to break the dullness of their daily routine. Instead, they see individual citizens, lobby organizations, public interest groups as part of an expanding network of activism that had developed in Washington over the previous generation. In short: the good news is . . . the bad news is wrong. America remains a participatory society.

Election turnout has declined, but this is not typical of all political activity. The repertoire of action has actually expanded, and people are now more engaged in more forms of political participation. Participation in election campaigns is still common. People are working with informal groups in their community to address local problems--and this has grown over time. More people today make the effort to directly contact their elected representative or other government officials. The repertoire of political action now includes a variety of protest activities. When one adds political consumerism and Internet activism, the forms of action are even more diverse.

Thus, there are four major lessons from our findings. First, turnout rates in elections are a poor indicator of the overall political involvement of Americans. It is the most easily available statistic for local, state and national politics--and it extends back in time. However, there is more to democracy than elections. Other non-electoral modes of individualized or direct political action have increased over time. Rather than disengagement, the repertoire of political action has broadened.

Changes in political participation are analogous to changes in the contemporary media environment. Compared to a generation ago, Americans are consuming much more information about politics, society and other topics. People are also consuming information from a greater diversity of media sources, some of which did not exist a generation ago. If one only tracked the viewership of the news programs on the major television networks, however, the statistics would show a downward trend in viewership over time. The declining viewership for ABC, CBS and NBC is not because people are watching less television--they are watching more hours per day--but because there are more alternatives today. This is the same with participation: people are more activity in more varied forms of action.

Certainly we should not dismiss the decrease in voting turnout. Elections are important because they select political elites, provide a source of democratic legitimacy, and engage the mass public in the democratic process. If large proportions of young (and older) Americans do not vote, this lessens their representation in the political process (and may change election outcomes). It is not healthy for democracy when half or more of the public voluntarily abstains from electing government officials. This is especially problematic when the elected government does not represent all the people--and makes decisions that a full majority of Americans do not support. For instance, given these differential turnout rates it is not surprising that the government devotes increasing resources to programs benefitting seniors while providing proportionately less support for the young. This realization has stimulated efforts to re-engage young people in elections.<sup>25</sup> However, the goal of participation reforms should not only be to encourage young people to act like their grandparents (and vote out of a sense of duty), but to also show how one can exert meaningful political influence through voting as well as new forms of participation.

Second, the shifting patterns of political action reflect ongoing trends in the skills and political norms of the American public. As the political skills and resources of the public have increased, this alters the calculus of participation. Turning out to vote is a relatively simple political act, and is often mobilized by social or political groups through ‘get out the vote’ drives. More people today can engage in more demanding forms of political action, such as individualized activity and direct action. Writing letters to a government official, for example, is less likely when three-fifths of the public has less than a high school education (the electorate of 1952), than when three-fifths have some college education (the electorate of

2008). Similarly, changing norms of what it means to be a good citizen are affecting participation styles. People want to be active in methods that give them more direct say and influence in political and society. Many citizens will still vote because of the importance of elections to the democratic process. However, their participation repertoire includes more direct and individualized forms of action.

Third, the changing mix of participation activities has implications for the quality of citizen influence. Verba and Nie, for example, described voting as a high pressure activity because government officials are being chosen, but there is limited specific policy information or influence because elections involve a diverse range of issues.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the infrequent opportunity to cast a vote for a prepackaged party is a limited tool of influence. In contrast, 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 issue 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 political pressure than only through election campaigns. These new forms of action thus have the potential to increase the quantity and quality of democratic influence.

Finally, many discussions of democratic reform look to recreate an earlier period in American politics when campaigns and elections were more central to politics. But with the style of citizen participation changing, democratic institutions need to adjust. Over the past quarter century, campaigns, legislatures and the courts have undergone reforms to make them more accessible, transparent and accountable.<sup>27</sup> In addition, even the new forms of action describe in this chapter understates the expanding forms of democratic participation.<sup>28</sup> Scores of cities are developing citizen panels or citizen juries to discuss issues ranging from city budgets, to urban development to the schools. E-democracy is providing new opportunities for discussion and decision making. Deliberative assemblies are another new tool of citizen action. When taken together with the changes discussed in this chapter, America is arguably experiencing the greatest expansion of citizen participation since the Populist Movement of the early 1900s. Rather than a period of democratic decline, we face the opportunity for a new era of democratic expansion if we realize the challenges of a changing citizenry and respond to them positively.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972, pg. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Renewal of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000; Stephen Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation, and What We Can Do About It*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005; Alan Wolfe, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006; Martin Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002

<sup>3</sup> See the chapters by Damon, Wattenberg and Perea. Also see Mark Bauerlain, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*. New York: Penguin, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Moly Andolina, Krista Jenkins and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, pg. 189; Also see Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Post-modernization*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, pg. 307; also see Russell Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Transforming American Politics*, rev. ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> For the full comparison of both surveys see Dalton, *The Good Citizen*, chap. 4. There is a slight decrease in informal activity over time, although this might be due to the ambiguity of coding responses to such an open-ended question. Some of the examples of individual contacting in 1981 may also fit as examples of collective action involving an informal group.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Birnbaum, On Capitol Hill, the inboxes are overflowing. *Washington Post* (July 11, 2005): D01.

<sup>7</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone* and Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk* present trends in a wide variety of political activities, but many of these trends are from commercial marketing polls of uncertain quality. Other participation surveys change the time reference or the wording of the participation questions. The 1967 Verba/Nie survey, for example, did not have a clear time reference; their 1990 survey asked about activity over the previous twelve months. Other questionnaires vary the focus of activity or combine different activities in a single question. Neither the 1987 or 1989 surveys have been systematically replicated.

<sup>8</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, ch. 2; Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk*.

<sup>9</sup> Changes in campaign finance laws have altered the way that people give money to campaigns. Figure 1 presents only those who have given money to a party or a candidate in the campaign. However, other funds go to political action groups. In 2004, for instance, 15% of the public gave to at least one of these sources, so the percentage in the table is a conservative estimate.

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman and Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, pg. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Verba, Schlozman and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, pg. 72.

<sup>12</sup> Dalton, *Citizen Politics*, ch. 3; other source.

<sup>13</sup> Verba, Schlozman and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, pg. 72.

<sup>14</sup> Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*.

<sup>15</sup> See chapter by Micheletti and Stolle in this book. Also, Dietlind Stolle, Marc Hooghe, and Michele Micheletti, Politics in the supermarket: Political consumerism as a form of political participation. *International Political Science Review* (2005) 26: 245-270.

<sup>16</sup> The Citizens, Involvement and Democracy survey was conducted by the Center for Democracy and Civil Society (CDACS) at Georgetown University under the direction of Marc Howard. The data and associated materials are located at: <http://www.uscidsurvey.org/>

<sup>17</sup> Michael Alvarez and Thad Hall, *Point, Click and Vote: The Future of Internet Voting*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

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- <sup>18</sup> Aaron Smith, Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry Brady, *The Internet and Civic Engagement*. Pew Internet & American Life Project: [www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/15--The-Internet-and-Civic-Engagement.aspx](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/15--The-Internet-and-Civic-Engagement.aspx)
- <sup>19</sup> Smith, Schlozman, Verba and Brady, *The Internet and Civic Engagement*, pg. 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Dalton, *The Good Citizen*; Inglehart, *Modernization and Post-modernization*.
- <sup>21</sup> The general patterns in Figures 4-6 were broadly replicated in an analysis of the 2004 General Social Survey which has a shorter list of participation items. See Dalton, *The Good Citizen*, ch. 4. Additional information on the CDACS survey is in endnote 16.
- <sup>22</sup> Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?*, epilogue, tables 8.3, 8.4a.
- <sup>23</sup> Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?*, epilogue, table 8.6b. As critics argue that a lower baseline in youth turnout foretells a continuing lag as these citizens age, the higher group participation of youth may foretell continuing increases as they age.
- <sup>24</sup> John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-2.
- <sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the implications of lower turnout among the young see the chapters in the previous section.
- <sup>26</sup> Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, pg. 52.
- <sup>27</sup> Bruce Cain, Russell Dalton, and Susan Scarrow eds., *Democracy Transformed? Expanding Political Access in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- <sup>28</sup> Graham Smith, *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
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### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why are the patterns of participation changing in America? Is it due to the changes in technology and other institutional factors, or due to changes in the citizens themselves?
2. Will young people who protest or participate in online activism today remain politically active when they get older, or just drop their unconventional style of activity?
3. If Americans are changing the way they participate in politics, is this increasing or decreasing their ability to influence the government?
4. Is the growth in political activism a good thing for democracy if it comes at increasing inequality in who participates?

How can we best measure youth political participation and policy influence? Please note that there are different options to send your contributions: Login with your iKNOW Politics member credentials. Beyond numbers of representatives, we should look at the policy issues that have been influenced. These should be clearly documented with the results achieved. If one is advocating for budget allocation for maternal health, s/he should be able to follow through, how much is allocated, how much is spent on maternal health and what change has it caused - impact.