Passing the Torch: Millennials’ Attitudes
Towards Civic and Political Engagement

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Abstract

The Millennial Generation is approximately 50 million strong and growing in size – some have predicted that it will exceed the size of the Baby Boom generation. Are Millennials prepared to assume the responsibilities of leadership? We know their commitment to traditional forms of politics such as voting is unreliable while their dedication to volunteering and involvement at the local level remains stable. Do Millennials view traditional political engagement as playing a relevant role in the solution of public problems or has volunteering taken its place? If Millennials are turning away from the political realm, under what conditions and what factors explain such a shift?

We have approached these questions using a qualitative methodological approach – a series of focus groups of college students on four campuses (Franklin and Marshall College, Rutgers University, University of Florida, and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville) conducted in the fall of 2010. We have paid particular attention to the quality of youth attitudes towards the relevance of political versus community engagement. Preliminary findings suggest that, although their overall impressions of politics are negative, young people recognize the limitations of relying solely on the civic sphere to solve public problems. Our research offers a first step in how we might: improve the theoretical framework of youth engagement; ask more precise survey questions; test even better hypotheses; and conduct sound experiments measuring the best methods of outreach to a generation with limited levels of engagement currently but virtually unlimited potential for power.
Acknowledgements

This project was an outgrowth of our Universities’ membership in the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement based at the Institute of Politics at Harvard University. We extend our appreciation to the Executive Director of the Institute of Politics, Catherine McLaughlin and to their Director of National Youth Engagement, Laura Simolaris – a constant source of support and encouragement. Thank you also to our partners at the other research sites – Nissa Dahlin-Brown and her team at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and Terry Madonna and Angela Knittle at Franklin and Marshall College. Finally, we thank the students at the respective campuses who participated in these focus groups who made this research possible.
**Introduction**

The Millennial Generation\(^2\), those currently between the ages of 18 and 29, is approximately 50 million strong and growing in size. Some have predicted that it will exceed the size of the Baby Boom generation (Howe and Strauss 2000, 74), and, thereby, has the potential to significantly impact the course of American democracy. At the same time, we know that Millennials’ attachment to the political process (including voting) is tenuous at best (Zukin et al. 2006). It is these dueling realities that provided the underlying motivation for the effort detailed in this paper – a research project with practical and educational implications.

The purpose of this research was to revisit, through focus groups of college students, the outstanding research question lingering in the study of youth participation – What are the contours of engagement among the Millennial Generation? We know that Millennials’ attachment to traditional forms of politics is not dependable while their commitment to volunteering and involvement at the local level remains stable (even during economically difficult times). The unanswered question is do Millennials view traditional political engagement as playing a relevant role in the solution of public problems or has community activity and volunteering taken its place? Survey results suggesting a broadening gap between youth sentiments towards volunteering versus political engagement provided the spark to address these research questions.\(^3\)

By exploring key attitudes impacting youth engagement, we have begun to shed light on the question of the relevance of political action versus volunteering. Our approach and subject matter (youth attitudes) offer then a first step in how we might improve the theoretical framework of youth engagement; ask more precise survey questions in future studies; test even better hypotheses; and conduct sound experiments measuring the best methods of outreach.

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There also was a practical component to this project. The participating campuses in this research project are all members of the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement based at the Institute of Politics at Harvard University. Founded in 2003, the National Campaign is a consortium of colleges and universities around the country whose shared goal is to develop civic-minded and politically engaged college students. Although a nonpartisan collection, we believe that politics matters and that political involvement is important. This is especially true among youth – its size, great ethnic diversity (about 20% are immigrants or children of immigrants⁴), and the sizable financial burden that this age group looks forward to carrying upon graduation⁵ all give the Millennial Generation a stake in the political process. Given the National Campaign’s mission to mobilize college students to be active citizens, we hope this research will better inform our outreach and educational efforts at our own campuses and at campuses around the country.

Moreover, what better time to take up these questions than the 50⁶th Anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s Presidency? In his Inaugural Address, President Kennedy memorably proclaimed that “the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans” and urged that generation to make public service a centerpiece of their citizenship. Fifty years later, is the Millennial Generation heeding this call and taking up the torch of service and leadership? We hope this research plays a part in answering this question.

**Literature Review & Theoretical Framework**

The object of our attention is engagement among youth – it is the behavior we seek to better explain, understand and predict through research and the activities we try to encourage through outreach. What do we mean by engagement? Engagement is multi-faceted and can take on various forms⁶:

- **Cognitive** – Cognitive engagement involves paying attention to what is going on in politics and takes on such forms as reading the newspaper, watching the news on television, or even discussing politics.

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• Political – Political or electoral engagement refers to those activities undertaken to affect the makeup of government such as voting, making campaign contributions to candidates, or volunteering for a campaign.
• Expressive – This form of engagement involves trying to affect the actions of government by speaking out either by contacting officials, protesting, or boycotting.
• Civic – This behavior involves trying to improve the community in which one lives by working on your own or with others directly. This might involve volunteering for a group, forming your own group, or fundraising for a cause.7

In his study of the quality and quantity of engagement among Americans in Bowling Alone (2002), Robert Putnam sounded an alarm about youth’s apparent disconnection from their communities. In comparing young people to older age cohorts, Putnam claimed “It is as though the post-war generations were exposed to some anti-civic X-ray that permanently and increasingly rendered them less likely to connect with the community” (Putnam 2000, 255).

Subsequent works have countered Putnam’s contention. In A New Engagement? (2006), Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Carpini suggest that engagement among the Millennial Generation is different from previous generations . . . not nonexistent. They hold that it is not so much that young people are disconnected from their communities but they are connected differently. According to the authors, youths have placed their emphasis on volunteering and service (the civic strain of engagement defined above) and are less connected to such traditional forms of political engagement as voting and demonstrating an interest in politics (the cognitive, political, and expressive methods).

A national focus group project conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) (Kiesa et al. 2007) offered a similar assessment arguing that Millennials:
• are more engaged in their communities than the generation that preceded them – Generation X.
• like to be involved locally but are disengaged from formal politics.
• do not see voting as an effective way of prompting change and see politics as “inefficient and difficult”.

7 These various forms of engagement are specified in Zukin et al. 2006, Table 3.1, 57-58.
Arguably the most traditional form of political engagement is voting. It is this form of engagement that highlights the stark contrast between Millennials and older generations. For example, in 2008, voter turnout among 18-29 year olds was at its nearly highest level (51.1%) since the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1972. Still, turnout rates in 2008 among young people lagged approximately 17 percentage points behind voters 30 years and older (voter turnout rates in 2008 among over 30 voters was 67%). Slight downturns in youth voter turnout for the 2009 governors’ races in New Jersey, Virginia, and Massachusetts and the 2010 midterm elections underscore the weak connection of young people to the voting process.

By contrast, Millennials lead other age cohorts when it comes to volunteering. The 2009 Civic Health Index released by the National Conference on Citizenship found that, despite the recent economic downturn, the youngest cohort out-paced Generation Xers, Baby Boomers, and those 65 or older when it came to volunteering.

This schism seems to be reflected now in youth attitudes towards political activity versus civic activity or volunteering. When young people were asked in a survey, conducted by the Institute of Politics (IOP) at Harvard University in fall 2008, whether they found that getting involved in politics honorable, 64% of 18-29 years olds surveyed agreed that political involvement was honorable. Similarly, 68% agreed that running for office was an honorable thing to do.

By 2010, these percentages had reversed. In 2010, when asked whether they found that getting involved in politics honorable, only 31% of 18-29 years olds answered affirmatively. Similarly, only 35% of respondents answered that running for office was an honorable thing to do. In both surveys (2008 and 2010), a majority of respondents deemed community service honorable (although there was a decline in the percentage - 89% in 2008 to 70% in 2010). These findings were buttressed with data gathered by the IOP in the spring of 2011.

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8 For more information on youth voter turnout rates, see http://www.civicyouth.org/ResearchTopics/research-topics/political-participation-and-voting/
Such results heighten our interest in the research question left unanswered by Zukin et al. Specifically, have young people begun to view community involvement or civic engagement as a more desirable route for solving public problems than the use of political and expressive methods of engagement - addressing societal issues by taking action to shape the makeup of government and influence these officials? To put it more succinctly, has civic engagement, thereby, become a substitute for political behavior?

Our next consideration then is the factors that influence the contours of youth engagement – civic, political, or both. From previous research, we know that there are many variables that might affect a young person’s behavior whether it is their propensity to vote and/or volunteer.

These factors include:

- their socioeconomic background and their level of education or skills (Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes 1960; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980)
- the extent to which they have been mobilized by political parties, campaigns, or other groups to involve themselves in the political or civic process (Green and Gerber 2008; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993)
- the political socialization they have experience either by parents, school, the media, etc.

In this collective research project, we are focusing our attention on the role of attitudes. There is plenty of research that demonstrates that attitudes matter and that they influence behavior. For example, we know that such attitudes as efficacy (sense of confidence that one is prepared to participate in political process and that government is responsive) (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes 1960; Moe 1980) and civic duty (Campbell et al 1960; Riker and Ordeshook 1968) affect the nature and intensity of involvement. In the model of engagement Zukin et al. constructed (2007), they found that a person’s outlook, their sense of connection to the political process, and their sense that politics matters had a strong effect on the quality and quantity of their engagement.

There is plenty left to learn regarding youth attitudes towards civic and political engagement and, ultimately, their connection to youth behavior. First, of the existing research, some surprising and counterintuitive findings have emerged on the subject. In addition to the reversal in sentiments regarding honorability reported above, Zukin et al. found that negative feelings towards politics among youth
actually encouraged rather than thwarted political engagement. Better understanding these attitudes and their potential ramifications then is important before we can study with confidence the best ways to encourage behavior.

Second, we know that a few key attitudes among youths differ starkly from older generations. Civic duty is a striking example. In their research, Zukin et al. found that Baby Boomers and pre-Baby boomers believe that there are obligations or duties associated with being a good citizen (such as voting or staying informed) while younger generations view such activities as choices rather than responsibilities. As we know, voter turnout rates between these generations differ markedly. In light of these generational contrasts, better understanding of the contours of these attitudes and their links to behavior among Millennials becomes even more important if we hope to engage youth in all forms of engagement.

Third, the Millennial Generation is a generation in progress. It still is not clear whether their attitudes and behavior are a function of their stage in life or of their generation. Consequently, it is important to continue to explore and refine our appreciation of their attitudes and behavior. As the generation ages, we may see some of these behaviors in question shift with Millennials beginning to embrace those types of political action pursued by older generation (this would lend support to the argument that Millennials are “growing out” of those attitudes and behaviors identified in the last five years ). On the other hand, if Millennials continue to exhibit less dependence on political and expressive engagement (the ballot box and the bullhorn so to speak), then we will be in a stronger position to state that there are traits inherent to this generation which not only need to be understood but addressed effectively if we want to ensure the health of American democracy.

Methods

Approach

We pursued a qualitative methodological approach in addressing our research questions – focus groups of college students. Qualitative research seeks to better understand behavior, civic and political behavior in this case, from the perspective of the subjects themselves. It is exploratory and descriptive allowing researchers to gather details and impressions that cannot be gathered from surveys. Inductive in nature, qualitative research uses the impressions of subjects, among other things, to construct hypotheses and ultimately build a “grounded theory” (Bogdan and Biklan 2007; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Merriam 2009).
Given our subject matter, this was a useful approach. The focus group structure allowed us to clarify troubling or confusing findings revealed via survey research such as those uncovered in the IOP study regarding the honorability of participation. Also, as stated above, the Millennial Generation is a generation in progress – there is much that is still unknown. It is challenging to test theories of youth engagement when the causal connections are unclear as of yet. Given some marked contrasts between young generations and older generations, the same theories of engagement may not hold true. Rather than simply shake our proverbial heads in disgust at youths’ apparent disconnection from political life, the more productive approach is to better understand their attitudes and their impact on behavior so we can get about the business of encouraging their active involvement in the political process.

Sample

Focus groups were conducted in the fall of 2010 on the following campuses:

- Franklin and Marshall College
- Rutgers University, New Brunswick, Piscataway Campus
- University of Florida
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville

The population we sought to approximate in selecting our samples was the undergraduate population of our respective campuses. Incentives offered to students to participate in the research project varied by campus and included food and drinks at the focus group; $25 cash cards; and inclusion in a drawing for materials items such as a college sweatshirt. Likewise, methods of recruitment varied by campus and included random selection of students via lists of email addresses; random selection of students at high traffic areas on campus or large course; and media outreach via campus newspapers and listservs.  

13 Each campus participating in this research prepared protocols for the focus groups to be conducted on their campuses that were then reviewed and approved by their respective Institutional Review Boards (Franklin and Marshall College, Protocol #8; Rutgers University, Protocol #E10-295; University of Florida, Protocol #2010-U-0726; University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Protocol approved 10-19-2010).
A total of 16 focus groups were conducted:

- **Franklin and Marshall College:**
  - Undergraduate population of approximately 2,000
  - 1 focus group conducted on November 5, 2010
  - 5 subjects
- **Rutgers University:**
  - Undergraduate population of approximately 30,000
  - 5 focus groups conducted between October 18-November 1, 2010
  - 40 subjects
- **University of Florida:**
  - Undergraduate population of approximately 50,000
  - 3 focus groups conducted between September 16, 2010-November 17, 2010
  - 37 subjects
- **University of Tennessee, Knoxville:**
  - Undergraduate population of approximately 21,000
  - 5 focus groups conducted between October 19-28, 2010
  - 56 subjects

Focus groups were video and/or audio taped and students utilized a pseudonym (or research number or letter) in order to maintain confidentiality. The research teams of the four participating campuses followed a common outline of questions that explored the nature of subjects’ civic and political engagement as well as the factors influencing this engagement – with a special emphasis on their outlook and attitudes (see Appendix for focus group guide). As expected, state, local, and campus politics necessitated variations in questions between campuses.

A total of 138 students participated in the 16 focus groups. Unfortunately, due to differences between campuses on the information gathered, it is difficult to construct a complete demographic picture of the sample. Based on the data gathered, we know the following regarding the sample:
Of the three research sites that gathered data regarding students’ gender, 54% were female and 46% were male.

Of the two research sites that gathered data regarding students’ ethnic background, 49% were white; 19% were African American; 18% were Asian; and 10% were Latino.

Regarding field of study, majors included social sciences; natural sciences; business; and the humanities.

**Data Analysis**

Each campus participating in this project assembled their own research teams to administer focus groups on their campus. Transcripts of each focus group were generated and supplied to the principal investigator. The researchers followed the “constant comparative” method of data analysis commonly used with qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklan 2007; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Merriam 2009). The overriding purpose was to identify themes common between campuses and to take steps to explore all dimensions of these themes. Steps of analysis included:

- Open-coding of the transcripts and, using this open-coding, constructing an inductive category system for the qualitative data gathered for the various units of study.
- Using excel, researchers sorted the qualitative data into the categories & sub-categories they constructed.
- Categories and sub-categories were revised when appropriate ensuring that the process was iterative and fluid.

Given the nature of this project, more attention has been placed on understanding to the fullest extent possible the qualities of students’ attitudes towards the activities under study rather than quantifying the number of subjects who fell into one category or another. We have taken steps throughout though to indicate with which categories students identified most or least. As explained in the final section, it is our hope that the data gathered here will allow us in future studies to ask more precise questions in quantitative studies and, thereby, more accurately measure these variables.
Findings

Operating under the assumption that attitudes play an influential role in the nature of youth behavior in their communities and the political sphere (although for reasons specified earlier, exactly what these attitudes look like and how they affect behavior is still an open question), we used these focus groups as an opportunity to explore subjects’ thoughts about politics and public officials; the role of politics and the community; and their responsibilities as citizens. In our analysis, we considered how consistent responses were to previous research on the subject and what light they shed on the research question regarding the contours of youth engagement.

Feelings About Politics

In each focus group, the research subjects were asked ‘What words or thoughts come to mind when you hear the word “politics”’. This is a question that was asked in recent national qualitative and quantitative studies of youth participation (Kiesa et al. 2007; Zukin et al. 2006) and is meant to gather general impressions of the subject of politics.

Using a similar coding scheme as Zukin et al. (2007), we found that responses to this question fell into four distinct categories:

- **Positive** - These responses suggest that subjects view the political process in a positive light – mostly because they consider politics intellectually stimulating. Words that came to mind for subjects whose responses were categorized as positive were “good hearted conversation”, “interesting”, “diversity of opinion”, and “debate”. A relatively small number of responses fell into this category.

- **Neutral** - A large number of students’ responses fell under the category we named neutral. Responses were placed in this category if they were neither obviously positive nor negative. We further divided this category into three sub-categories:
  - **Textbook** - These responses entailed “textbook” descriptions of American democracy such as “government, constitution” or “President, government, democracy”, “campaigns”

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14 Zukin et al. 2006 referred to this category as “descriptive”.
or as one student worded it, “I think of government, the President, everyone who works under him. “

- **Sovereignty** - These responses, such as “picking your government, choosing your future”, also were descriptive in nature but made reference to the popular sovereignty inherent in the American system of government. Zukin et al. categorized such responses as *neutral* as we have done, but a good argument could be made that responses that call attention to the power of citizens might rightly be classified as *positive*.

- **Issues** – A selection of students indicated that the term politics reminds them of the pressing public problems that intersect with their lives and the workings of government. As one student put it, “I also think about the major issues in America such as economics and health care and immigration and stuff like that, just the major issues that affect our lives and that get people interested and involved in government”.

- **Negative** – A comparatively large number of responses fell into this category and can be further categorized in the following ways (with key descriptive phrases included):
  
  - **Uncivil** – Responses that were placed in this category included “critical, nonsensical debates”, “arguing”, “fighting”. For many students, their negativity towards politics seemed to revolve around the ineffectiveness of the political process that results from the perceived incivility, “Politics is just arguing. It’s not worth it. Policies just go back and forth between incoming and outgoing administrations. Nothing ever gets done. It’s a waste of time. Politics is just a source of controversy”.
  
  - **Dishonest/corrupt** - “lies”, “corruption”
  
  - **Selfishly motivated** - “money, power, influence,”
  
  - **“Crowd pleasing”** - “putting on a face, acting”, “be a rock star”
  
  - **Partisanship** – Like the category regarding incivility, students’ frustration with politics seemed to stem from the negative impact of partisanship on accomplishments, “My thing is more like it should be based on what issues you personally stand for and not which party affiliation you’re in. I just think that’s completely ridiculous”.

- **Other** – This last category contained responses that suggested a distance or sense of removal from traditional politics. Sub-categories (with key phrases) include responses that suggest that politics excludes people or that is just so complicated that it is out of reach.
  
  - **Exclusionary**- “closed doors”, “doesn’t help everyone”
  
  - **Cumbersome** – “bunch of hoops to go through”, “it’s all bureaucracy”. Again, negativity towards politics among subjects seemed to stem from their frustration that bureaucracy
thwarts accomplishments, “Everything is so complicated in politics. Takes too long for anything to get done. Lack of results”.

- Unrepresentative – Responses in this category suggested that subjects felt either that they did not have the information they needed to be an active participant in the political process or that the issues being discussed by public officials did not speak to their needs.

So what do we make of these findings? Most of the responses of subjects fell under the negative category, the sub-categories incivility and corruption in particular. This contrasts with Zukin’s research (the most thorough recent study of youth) in which most response fell under the category neutral. The negativity of our subjects to the idea of politics certainly isn’t surprising given current survey data and the overall mood of the country.

Furthermore, a preponderance of negative responses isn’t necessarily a sign that such students are hostile to political participation. In fact, in their research, Zukin et al. found (perhaps counter to our intuition) that it was those youths who offered responses that could be categorized as neutral or negative who were most likely to engage in traditional forms of politics. This finding parallels research demonstrating that cohorts that possess lower levels of external political efficacy or a weak sense that government is responsive to their concerns (African Americans in particular) often are more likely to engage in expressive forms of political participation (Shingles 1981).

On the discouraging side, a good number of students offered responses that fell under the other category suggesting that they believe that the political process is somehow removed from them. It is these students who tend to be less likely to participate in the political process. On the bright side, we did not find in response to this question (as Zukin did) that students felt excluded for socioeconomic reasons - that politics was for the rich, etc. This may be a reflection of the diversity of the Millennial Generation as a whole. If feelings of exclusion are the result of a political system that seems confusing and cumbersome, this offers the hope that, with the right guidance and information, the process can be more welcoming.
Civic Duty

Classic political science research has identified a link between a sense of civic duty and civic action (Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes 1960; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). As indicated earlier, recent national research by Zukin et al. (2006) found generational differences (and differing effects) when it came to civic duty with older generations identifying active, positive duties associated with citizenship and younger citizens taking a more passive stance. Our research uncovered a few key similarities and a few key differences with these findings.

Participants in our focus groups were asked, “Are there any duties associated with citizenship?” and responses fell into four basic categories and various sub-categories:

- **Traditional Duties** – A good selection of the responses suggested that students believed there to be some active responsibilities that might be considered traditional methods of political, civic, and expressive engagement.
  - **Vote/Vote in Important Elections/Speak Out** – Responses in this category included “How many countries let you vote for a President?” “Speak up if I don’t like something that’s going on”, “to speak up and not just pass by situations that need to be addressed”.
  - **Military Service** – “Definitely think for one to fight when called upon”
  - **Volunteering** – Responses in this category reflect subjects’ notion that, when there is a problem in one’s community, it is one’s civic duty to react and remedy that problem by joining a community organization, forming an organization or movement, or voluntarily addressing the problem. As one student put it, “if there’s a problem that really stands out to you, you have to be the one to go change it, you can’t just wait for someone else to do it”.
  - **Pick Up the Slack for Government** – More specific than the responses regarding volunteering, some subjects suggested that, when government is unable to perform certain functions, that the people must step in, by working in their communities, to meet needs unmet by government.
  - **Patriotism** – A selection of students also cited the importance of standing up for your country or believing in American democracy, “I think you need to be proud to be an American and not just give up on the country. We might be one of the youngest in the world but it still has so much change involved in it throughout the years.”
• **Be Aware**
  
  o *Keep an Eye on the Government* – Some responses suggested that it was the responsibility of citizens living in a representative democracy to play the role, in effect, of a government watchdog. Responses in this category included “Your responsibility is to check up on the leaders” and “I think letting your legislators know that you’re watching them and you know what they’re voting for, you see their voting records”.
  
  o *Be Informed* – These responses underscored the importance some subjects placed on keeping up with what’s going on in the world of politics and going into the voting booth well-informed, “Know the candidates, what the issues are, and their stances on the issues”.

• **Be a Good Person** – Some responses reflected the more passive conception of citizenship uncovered in previous research in which being a good person equates with being a good citizen.
  
  o *Do Your Job* – Some responses reflected a fairly basic threshold for good citizenship and involved “working an honest job, going to college” and “Paying taxes in April”.
  
  o *Contribute to Society* - Some respondents raised the bar of citizenship somewhat and asserted that the notion of being a good person involved being “a functional member of society” and that citizens were “expected at least to be contributing something” to their community (although how that was conceptualized was not altogether clear).
  
  o *Respect Others* - Respecting other cultures and other genders was another manifestation of being a good person and, thereby, being a good citizen.

• **No Duties, It Varies** – Others stated that there were no inherent duties to being a citizen or, if there were, they did not involve specific activities or they varied according to circumstances.
  
  o *No Duties* – Some respondents stated definitively that citizenship did not entail any inherent responsibilities, “No explicit duties, never spelled out to you”, “If there were, you would be punished if you didn’t”.
  
  o *No Specific Duties* - Some respondents clarified that there were no specific duties to do such things as vote, speak out, or volunteer. One respondent suggesting that acting out of duty wasn’t necessarily the best way to proceed, “voting for the sake of voting, is that the right thing to do?” As another student put it, “It’s important to vote, but I think as an American citizen it’s your right not to vote”.
  
  o *Varies* - “I think it’s different for every individual” sums up the tenor of responses in this category.
Responses were fairly well-distributed among these categories with the most cited responses including

- voting is specifically a duty
- duty to be informed
- duty to be a functional member of society

Our research then revealed some similarities and some key differences with Zukin’s conclusions. In that 2006 study, the researchers found that younger subjects overwhelmingly cited “being a good person” or “being a functioning member of society” as their primary duties as citizens. Being informed was not commonly identified as a duty among the youngest age cohort in that research.

Responses in our study show a mixture of traditional cognitive, expressive, and political duties and the more passive notion of “be a good person”. Obviously, we can’t state definitively that this marks a change in youth in general since the last major study was conducted or if these are attitudes are unique to students in the fall of 2010. It does put our subjects more in line with the attitudes of older generations who have a higher propensity to engage in traditional forms of engagement.

Honorability of Politics

As stated earlier, the drastic shift in attitudes among young people towards the honorability of political involvement and community service was a motivating factor in our research in that, among other things, it underscored the possibility that young people were turning away from traditional political action in favor of community action. A summary of these results (gathered by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University) can be found in Table 1 and show a decline in a sense that political activity and running for office is an “honorable” thing to do while community involvement (although there has been some decline since 2008) is viewed as a much more “honorable” activity.

Obviously, our research can’t explain why these numbers declined in recent years. Through conversations with our subjects though, we can gain at least a better understanding of what factors determine their sentiments regarding the honorability of each form of engagement. Interestingly, these conversations revealed that the intention of the individual engaged in the action in question (whether it is political or civic action) plays a key role in students’ thinking regarding the honorability of the action. It also
suggests, back to our original research question, that students still believe that the political process plays a relevant role in the lives of citizens.

In our focus groups, students were asked “Do you think volunteering or civic action is honorable?” Likewise, we asked “Do you think that participating in politics is honorable?” We found that, in the minds of many research subjects, there was an intersection between the honorability of an action and the intention behind the action.

_Honorability of Civic Engagement_

The subject of the intention behind one’s volunteer activity came up frequently in different segments of the focus groups (not just around this topic). For example, students often mentioned how such incentives as strengthening college applications and gaining future employment motivated their involvement in volunteer activities (although there were plenty of students who engaged in volunteer activities just for the purpose of doing good).

Even when the motives behind volunteering were not necessarily pure, subjects believed that the activity itself was still honorable. For example, one student stated,

“Like when you do it, I hope that everyone does it with 100% of their effort, so since the result is coming out, you have to consider that hey they’re putting their time even though it’s not enjoyed but the result, the product is being achieved.”

Along these same lines, another student stated,

“I think that overall, any community service that’s done for whatever reason, the end result is always a good thing”.

We did have some students who suggested that volunteer activities done for purely selfish reasons render the activity itself dishonorable. One student stated,

“Like you’re just trying to volunteer to get ahead, it’s almost like you’re using the people that need your help and you’re not invested in it and like if it wasn’t helping you then you would drop it, you know?”.
Although the difference isn’t great, more students still seemed to support the idea that impure intention doesn’t affect the overall honorability of the activity. Finally, we had a few students who suggested that, even when one’s intentions are good, volunteering isn’t necessarily honorable because it relieves the government of a burden they should be bearing.

“I think that you’re, by volunteering and taking care of some of the issues that I feel may be the government should be taking care of you sort of umm aren’t holding them accountable to do what they should be doing.”

Similarly, some students’ negative sentiments regarding volunteering centered on the notion that volunteering is tantamount to a “band-aid”, is doesn’t offer a real or long-lasting solution,

“I can go help out at a homeless shelter or work at a soup kitchen, but that’s not really solving someone’s problem of being homeless. Like that’s not attacking the larger issue. I mean, that’s not a reason not to be involved, but that’s something that I always feel is a challenge is how to, not just put band-aids on things, but to actually fix the larger problem.”

Such a response touches on the limits of community-based action versus political action and will be taken up again the final section regarding our findings.

**Honorability of Political Engagement**

Again, intention seemed to have a significant impact on students’ assessment of whether political action was honorable. This stands in sharp contrast to students’ attitudes regarding volunteering. It should be noted that these discussions tended to involve the intentions of those running for office not necessarily the average citizen involved in political activities.

According to our research subjects, political engagement is considered honorable only when it is done with pure intentions and is pursued to address important issues that mean something to that politician or individual. As one student stated,

“I believe it is honorable to run for political office and you know and hold political office as long as you know what you stand for and you know you’re not willing to give up.”

Such political action was viewed among research subjects as visionary or a sign of leadership that was likely to bring about real change. Along the same lines, a selection of subjects offered that there is honor in taking up the responsibility of public service and leadership.
“Even the president, we can complain all we want to about the healthcare bill and everything but I mean, at the same time, you’ve got to honor it because he’s taken on all this pressure and this stress and trying to run a country. It’s not easy. Even just trying to run a county, trying to run anything is not easy.”

Unlike discussion of volunteering, politics is never considered honorable when the intentions of political actors are impure. We have two interesting findings here – most students assume that politicians’ motives are dishonorable and these impure motives automatically render their actions dishonorable. This idea was expressed by a few students,

“I think all these people who are involved and get into office and it really just becomes a job to them and it’s not anymore about changing the system.”

“There are the people who want to join politics purely for the power involved and I feel like if you’re doing it for the honor involved that’s a very dishonorable motive.”

Even when individuals run for office with pure intentions, there is an assumption that they will eventually become more and more selfish and, thereby, their actions become dishonorable.

“I think most people go into that field with honorable intentions and then they realize they may have to do things to keep their job that they didn’t originally intend to do. I think for most politicians it’s about keeping the job rather than doing what’s right.”

What overall conclusions can we draw from the discussion of honorability and engagement? The information we gathered has value in that it sheds light on a subject that has received little attention thus far in the literature – the notion of honorability. This exploration suggests that an understanding of honorability hinges on subjects’ perceptions of an actor’s intention. Here then we see the value of qualitative research and its ability to make sense of troubling survey results.

What do we know about the notion of intent? Zukin et al (2006) do reference opinions on the motivations of public officials and found that youth generally were cynical and disillusioned by officials. This feeling certainly seemed to reflect our subjects’ views of public officials. It is important to note, though, that some of our subjects did believe that there were some public officials, more often local officials, who were not motivated by purely selfish reasons. The overall negative sentiments though are in line with

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15 Probably the closest attitude to “honorability” would be trust in local and federal government – a subject that has received a good deal of scholarly attention.
those discussed previously – the preponderance of responses to the question ‘What words come to mind when you hear the word “politics”? ’ that were negative in nature.

As stated earlier, those with negative sentiments aren’t necessarily predetermined to be disengaged in the political process. In fact, responses to these questions regarding honorability seem to suggest that young people continue to believe the political process has a relevant role in their lives.

The underlying feeling that political engagement done for the wrong reasons is dishonorable (unlike community service done for the wrong reason) seemed to be based on the fact that politics has a greater impact on society than community service,

“... you’re affecting much more people than helping out a few people making sandwiches in a soup kitchen. The impact is much higher; you’re affecting hundreds of people not just a couple thousand, hundreds of thousands.”

“The intent’s not so important with community service because there really are no consequences for having bad intent doing community service and doing something good, when you run for office you have bad intent, there are consequences to not kind of following through, like if you’re running with that bad intent that’s going to carry over into your actual kind, when you’re actually in office you’re gonna do things in a corrupt way, you’re gonna take money from people, and there’s major consequences in having that money while you’re in a position of such power.”

Not every student shared this sentiment, so this is only a tentative conclusion. As such, it deserves more study. It does suggest though that students recognize a role for politics – a role that is more broad then community involvement, and shows that while subjects emphasize the importance of pure intentions in political involvement, that this in many ways is propelled by the fact that they believe that politics has a greater impact than volunteering or civic engagement.

Connection Between Political and Civic Engagement

We end by zeroing in on our overriding research question of young people’s connection to politics and volunteering. In our focus groups, we asked students “If there was a problem or issue you cared about, what would be the best way to address it or to solve it?” As an example, students were often asked, “Imagine you cared about the issue of homelessness, what would be the best way to go about solving it – working at the community level (i.e. Elijah’s Promise) or working through the political process to address the problem?” These questions were meant to elicit students’ sentiments regarding the relevance of
politics vs. working directly in one’s community. To access students’ sentiments on this subject we sometimes asked whether there were political causes and/or solutions to public problems that concerned them.

Responses fell into three overall categories:

- **Solve problems by working through the political process** – Responses within this category suggested that politics has a great impact and is effective for larger projects; there are greater resources within the political process; and that volunteering is disheartening. Some responses suggested that, even if volunteering feels good, political action is more likely to produce results. As one student stated, “I think volunteering would offer more personal satisfaction and like some people have mentioned, direct benefit. But I think you can have a larger overall impact through political engagement in certain forms.”

- **Solve problems by working on them directly, in the community** - Responses suggesting that civic engagement is preferable, cited that the political process is disheartening and discouraging, that volunteering is quicker and feels good; and that volunteering is most effective for small projects. As in other units of study, subjects seemed to opt for volunteering due to the slow and cumbersome process of political action,

  “I think community service addresses the real needs of the people immediately as they are needing the services. You’re feeding someone – they’re not starving to death. Whereas you’re politically engaged you’re helping the overall picture but its more long term. It takes forever to pass things through and to get money just to fund programs so, I think community service is slightly more important, if I had to choose one.”

- **Connection Between the Political and the Civic** – Some responses made it clear that solutions to public problems don’t lie in one realm or the other with some positing that public issues often initiate at the local level and evolve into politics. As one student put it, “Political change can’t happen without social change.”

What do we take away from this analysis? We found a good deal of support for the notion that volunteering is a better option than politics. Students found politics very disheartening where they found volunteering edifying. This certainly supports the idea that young people are distancing themselves from politics in favor of community involvement.
However, there also was strong support for the idea that volunteering or working at the grassroots level/the micro level has limited effects and that such work will ascend and become political eventually,

“... grassroots movements turn in to affecting politics. You start off in a small group like if my town had an issue then surrounding towns might have the issue, and become a county issue. Start from one group of people and come together in that then it sort of fixed like a ripple effect.”

As indicated in the previous section, some students held that there are limits to volunteering and that solutions resulting from volunteering are tantamount to a band-aid and offer no long-term solutions to public problems. As one student said, “You have homeless shelters, but what’s that really doing? It’s helping, but it’s not. They’re still homeless”. Some students even suggested that community service itself is dependent upon the political process, intertwining the realms even further,

“I think politics have a more vast power and influence on society in general than community service, and I think in a way politics also influence has an effect on the level of community service options than can be available, so in that way, I think it’s more powerful”.

As stated in at the outset of this paper, Millennials’ propensity to engage in volunteering is a unique feature of this generation. It is clear though, based on the qualitative data gathered in these focus groups, that young people recognize the relevance, even the necessity, of politics and political solutions to public problems.

**Conclusions/Implications**

As indicated at the outset, we believe there is good reason for young people to be involved in all forms of engagement – cognitive, political, expressive, and civic – and that this engagement should take place today. Ideally, efforts to mobilize such activity should be evidence-based. We know that attitudes affect behavior. What is not altogether clear is the nature of youth’s attitudes towards the various forms of engagement; how these attitudes affect their behavior; and how best to reach out to students in light of this information. But we’ve taken a good first step with this project.

Based on our research, we know that
- there is a good deal of negativity towards politics and public officials among young people.
in addition to viewing “being a good person” as a prerequisite for good citizenship, voting, speaking out and being informed also are considered civic duties.

feelings that politics is dishonorable compared to volunteering seem to have to do mainly with negative view of politicians and their motives not necessarily the political process itself.

To be sure, we know that negativity towards politics and politicians is not unique to young people. We also have reason to believe that it does not doom either current or future engagement. We also see that, at least among our subjects, such traditional forms of political and cognitive engagement are viewed as keys to good citizenship.

Zeroing in on our research question, we also know that

- the political process is viewed as having broad and substantial effects.
- the political process is considered the best way to address large-scale public needs.

The qualitative data we’ve gathered through these focus groups provide a rich description of students’ attitudes or a window into their perceptions of the relevance of engagement of all sorts. This is a first step towards building an accurate model of engagement among the Millennial Generation. What are the next steps?

Although there are limits to the generalizability of qualitative data, the information gathered from these focus groups will prove valuable for formulating questions to include in future survey instruments. Students’ discussions will determine to a great extent the sort of questions we will pose and how we will pose them. For example, we saw that students’ feelings towards politics fell into four overall categories – negative, textbook, positive, and other. In the future, we might ask students to indicate the degree to which they believe that politics involves “good hearted discussion” on one end of the continuum to “incivility” on the other end of the continuum. Similarly, regarding civic duty, we might ask students in a survey, “Which of the following (“being a good person”, “being informed”, etc.) are duties of citizenship? Measuring these attitudes in a way that is reflective of students’ discussions is an important step in building a “grounded theory” of youth engagement.

Another equally important step is determining the effect of these attitudes on youth behavior. Specifically, what is the relationship between various attitudes (i.e. negativity towards politics or belief that “being a good person” equals civic duty) and the type of engagement one pursues or doesn’t pursue (cognitive,
political, expressive, and civic). It is by formulating and testing hypotheses regarding the connection between the two that will allow us to more acutely appreciate the theoretical framework of youth engagement and build an accurate model of the phenomenon.

Finally, a better appreciation of the subject of youth engagement is useful in that it offers an opportunity to test, and ultimately pursue, best methods of mobilization. Specifically, we might use this understanding as a starting point for quasi-experiments that measure which forms of outreach are most effective given the attitudes of youth. Quantitative research (rooted in the qualitative research we have conducted) may provide us with a clearer picture of youths’ sense of civic duty and the connection to behavior. With that information, we might design an experiment that delivers different messages regarding one’s duty to vote (either through a PSA, posters, Internet advertisements) and measure which is the most successful method for encouraging voting.

Better understanding of youth engagement and the attitudes underlying it also heighten the need for including efforts in curricula that help students link their pre-existing propensity to volunteer in their communities with the political process. “Service learning” is a promising method utilized in educational institutions, including our own, and is designed to encourage public service through volunteering. “Civic learning” programs are less prevalent and involve fostering skills needed to promote change through the political process. Clearly, such programs come with their own special set of problems – specifically the role of the University or a nonpartisan Institute maintaining its appropriate role. Some models exist and are beginning to be studied for their effectiveness (see Bardwell 2011). Given frequently cited frustration among students about the ineffectiveness of a cumbersome political process that is often mired in dispute, efforts that allow students to play a role in political solutions to public problems might provide a path to future political action and, thereby, foster the active citizenship called for by President Kennedy in his Inaugural Address half a century ago.
References


Table 1
Honorability of Political and Civic Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>HONORABILITY OF POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT (%)</th>
<th>HONORABILITY OF RUNNING FOR OFFICE (%)</th>
<th>HONORABILITY OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>89%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*This data was not gathered in the Spring 2011 survey.
Appendix

Focus Group Guide

- What are your goals for yourself after graduation (personal, professional, community)?
- What role do you see community service or volunteering playing in your future? What role does it play now? How about political involvement? What are some ways of being politically involved? How politically involved are you now?
- What words come to mind when you hear the word “politics” [looking to see if responses are “neutral” or traditionally associated with civics; negative; “for others”; positive]
- If you wanted to be politically involved, would you know how to go about it? Do you think the political process is open to you/accepting of you/available to you or are there any barriers?
- What duties do you think are associated with citizenship?
- Do you have a responsibility to be involved in your community (in the form of joining groups, volunteering, etc.)?
- How about duties to be politically involved? What are your political responsibilities (if any)? Duty to vote? Pay attention to politics? Contact public officials?
- Do you think community service is honorable? Why or why not?
- What sort of volunteer/service activities have you been involved with recently? On your own or as part of a club or class?
- Do you think these issues/causes have political causes or solutions? Are you interested in tackling these problems politically? Why or why not?
- Did you vote in the most recent election? Why or why not?
- Which of the following reasons typically explains why you don’t vote when you don’t vote?
  - You’ve recently moved and haven’t registered at new address
  - You’re not interested in politics
  - It’s too hard to get information about candidates
  - You don’t think your vote makes a difference in what happens in your life
  - You really dislike politics and government
  - You don’t think there is any difference between the parties
  - Voting is too much trouble
- Do you think voting matters? Do other forms of political participation matter?
- How about community service or volunteering? Do you feel as if you are making a difference when you engage in community service? Does volunteering make a bigger difference than political participation (such as voting)?
- What factors have had the greatest impact on your political interest, beliefs, activities (family, friends, teachers, etc.)?
- In what ways, if any, is Rutgers/your University preparing you to be a civically and politically engaged?