
12. Gen Z’s civic engagement: civic skills, political expression, and identity

*Ava Francesca Battocchio, Leticia Bode, Chris Wells,
Emily Vraga, Kjerstin Thorson and Stephanie Edgerly*

INTRODUCTION

Gen Zers around the world have grown up and come of age in a period rife with the implications of climate change, heightened right-wing extremism, threats to democracy, and rising inflation. Gen Z has also been characterized by an enhanced awareness of mental health care and body positivity, LGBTQIA+ and the spectrum of gender identity, as well as racial justice, diversity, equity and inclusion. The previous chapter on youth political engagement focused on digital media’s role in shaping engagement modes. In this chapter, we explore shifts in the basis for civic identity for many young people. Drawing on sociologists such as Giddens (1991) and Beck (1999), some scholars contend that because of their different experiences, new generations of citizens are embracing “lifestyle” politics (Bennett, 1998) or “rights-bearing” citizenship (Schudson, 1998). These perspectives share a view of citizenship that entails a decreased experience of duty and obligation, decreased identification with and trust in parties and official leaders, and decreased inclination to participate in organized, bounded protests. In place of these old norms are rising demands for expression, individuality, personalization, and flexibility in the acting out of civic identity, which may take the form of acts that can be practiced on a daily, lifestyle basis, such as becoming a vegetarian or making (at least occasional) conscious consumer choices, or non-political “community” participation, such as volunteering (Zukin et al., 2006). From this perspective, both changes in civic participation and digital media uses are seen as products of young people’s situatedness in a changing civic order and the particular technologies available (and developing) at that time (Wells, 2013).

In this chapter, we focus on three areas of particular interest when it comes to young citizens and digital politics:

- the role of socio-economic status and affinity groups;
- skills, online practices, and the definition of political engagement;
- what these changes imply for the study of political socialization and the practice of civic education.

A note before we continue – in this chapter, we intend to draw attention to how skills, identity, and socialization uniquely shape youth participation and practices.

Global youth are not monolithic, so why should we assume their civic engagement and online practices would be? Our discussion is by no means exhaustive, and while we include some international examples, our lens is primarily trained on American youth.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND AFFINITY GROUPS

Scholars of youth engagement have generally been moving away from searches for the direct effects of digital media, instead turning toward more nuanced perspectives in which technology is seen as one of many factors influencing an individual or group's likelihood of participating. The emerging consensus is, "it depends". But the factors on which it depends are coming into better focus.

One factor on which the impact of digital media on youth engagement depends is socio-economic status (SES). The study of how SES impacts youth engagement has deep implications, foremost among them the question of whether digital media significantly change the makeup of who becomes engaged. SES has long been a primary predictor of political participation. However, on a positive note, digital media seems to level the playing field in terms of political expression in ways that traditional offline political participation does not (Lane et al., 2023).

Systemic disenfranchisement and marginalization has received increased attention in recent years through digital media presentations of violence against Black and Brown individuals at the hands of the police, mounting Islamophobia and anti-Asian violence, growing anti-immigration sentiment, and threats to reproductive rights. Unsurprisingly, counter-narratives and movements have also experienced heightened discourse. It seems that every social concern has a related hashtag or two.

While discursive opportunities are perhaps some of the more visible examples of youth civic engagement associated with race and ethnicity, there are several ways that digital media influences behaviors both on and offline. Black youth are relatively more engaged in community and political action rather than activism, with political efficacy and social responsibility being key for civic engagement (Hope, 2016). Furthermore, engagement with critical reflection on social inequality often shapes participation in voting and socio-political action amongst Latinx and Black youth (Bañales et al., 2020). Overall, Black and Latinx youth seem to engage in more digital acts of political expression than their white peers (Lane et al., 2023).

Often motivated by social responsibility, combating injustice, and generating social change, undocumented and other immigrant-origin youth employ non-formal mechanisms of civic engagement, many of which are heavily dependent on digital media. For example, some youth utilize technology to network, participate in and lead community organizations or provide varying translation work of civic information (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Overall, social media plays the part of amplification within a larger transmedia strategy that scaffolds youth-led, local-level civil disobedience (Zimmerman, 2016).

It is difficult to determine the true extent of voting participation amongst Indigenous youth in the US or Canada, often compounded by access and trust issues (Canadian Heritage, 2021; CIRCLE, 2021). What is more apparent is that Indigenous youth, particularly First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth in Canada, are more likely to engage in non-electoral political activities than electoral activities (Canadian Heritage, 2021). One area that sets Indigenous content creators and social movements apart is the degree to which culture, beliefs, and language shape political discourse and practices (Raynauld et al., 2018). This is particularly evident on “Native TikTok” (Cole, 2021) and other platforms through content on topics such as climate activism and water governance, cultural genocide and the Indian Residential School System, land ownership restoration, language revitalization following racialized policies (Meighan, 2021), and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

In recent years, social media have often been venues to raise issues that disproportionately impact women, such as reproductive rights and sexual assault and harassment, and intimate partner violence, mainly through the use of hashtag-driven campaigns (e.g., #MeToo, #TimesUp). For example, the recent social media campaign #MeTooK12 (Lu, 2018) demonstrates that youth are shifting focus from issues that center adult voices to those of youth.

Despite the visible uptick in digital political mobilization, there is a representative gender gap in online political participation. One potential cause is incivility, particularly in that female and transgender individuals are often targeted in online harassment and tend to tolerate rather than respond directly (Haslop et al., 2021). In turn, visible uncivil behavior towards women in political discourse may influence the willingness of other women to engage politically online (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021). However, there is an ongoing debate about whether perceptions of incivility or political socialization drive how frequently women engage in visible political discourse (cf. Bode, 2017; Van Duyn et al., 2021).

Discrimination against sexual minorities can generate political participation. American queer college students are twice as likely as their non-queer peers to engage in more radical political non-electoral activity such as protests, rallies, and marches (Swank and Fahs, 2017). While some queer youth are more comfortable engaging in radical politics both on and offline, others search for safe spaces for socialization. Tumblr, a microblogging and social networking platform, is a popular, digital enclave amongst LGBTQIA2S+ youth, providing shelter from some of the more discriminatory corners of the Internet, enabling the exploration of gender, sexuality, and progressive politics (Cavalcante, 2019; Lucero, 2017). Fostering community is particularly important in that for transgender individuals, there is a reciprocal relationship between community connectedness and civic engagement, albeit the offline connection is stronger than online (Billard, 2022).

For youth with disabilities, digital devices are a potent tool for daily life (Baumgartner et al., 2023), political inclusion, and political engagement (Trevisan, 2020). Before the pandemic's influx of Zoom and other video-driven protests, virtual protests and additional online collective mobilization were long-established and integral to the disability rights movement (Trevisan, 2018). Youth with disabilities

are also tasked with identifying Assistive Technology and platform affordances that make civic information accessible. For instance, members of the American Sign Language (ASL) community reported using YouTube for dedicated ASL current affairs programming (Trevisan, 2020). Likewise, Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp groups are relatively accessible for socialization and information for students with visual impairments, though there was little political discussion (Della Líbera and Jurberg, 2020).

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the spectrum of disability, both visible and non-visible, driven partly by digital media. Many of these individuals utilize hashtags (Sarkar et al., 2021) and personal storytelling that surface concerns and challenge stereotypes associated with their visible and invisible disabilities, including chronic illness and mental health (Lawson, 2021). For instance, Instagram and TikTok have given rise to active figures in the disability rights and inclusion movement. While this content can generate less positive outcomes, like online harassment, creators can foster advocacy and community-building (Rauchberg, 2022). However, on platforms like TikTok, content that normalizes the lived experience of not only disabled but queer and trans creators is often disproportionately impacted by practices such as shadow banning and other forms of algorithmic suppression that limit the reach of their messaging (Köver and Reuter, 2019; Rauchberg, 2022).

Many of these areas have seen little work that centers on youth. We hope that this section serves as a call to action for scholars to devote more resources and energy to investigating the intersection between digital media, politics, and various affinity groups and the impact on youth political participation.

SKILL AND ONLINE PRACTICES

“Digital media” can refer to various platforms, devices, and uses, and some uses of digital media are more tightly linked to the emergence of political behavior than others (Valenzuela et al., 2012). Young people tend to primarily use social media for non-political and entertainment content (Binder et al., 2021). However, digital media, mainly social media, may increase incidental exposure to political news and political knowledge, with potential implications for how youth engage civically (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020), or avoid such engagement (Milhailidis, 2020). Furthermore, such exposure can be a critical way to get information about social and political issues that might not be covered in the curriculum into the hands of marginalized young adults while circumnavigating adults whom they may view as untrustworthy (Kaskazi and Kitzie, 2021).

Regardless of whether it is incidental or intentional, digital news exposure requires that the user has technical skills for using the Internet and the literacy to understand how online platforms and information are structured. While there is debate about different types of literacy – for example, media, news, information, or digital literacies – the term literacy incorporates both knowledge of the environment and the skills to navigate it (Vraga et al., 2021b). For online environments, relevant literacies

have been theoretically (Vraga et al., 2021b) and empirically (Vraga and Tully, 2021) related to civic engagement and quality information recognition and consumption. However, the link between literacy and information consumption and civic engagement is not clear cut; there are other examples wherein greater literacy and/or educational efforts to boost literacy have failed (Vraga et al., 2021a). Indeed, literacy can sometimes create cynicism about the media environment and disengagement rather than healthy skepticism.

Additionally, it is vital to consider demography's role in shaping skill acquisition and subsequent political behavioral outcomes. Youth media research tends to focus on those from WEIRD settings (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic), often overlooking marginalized youth (Jordan and Prendella, 2019). Scholars argue that curriculum differences amongst these populations highlight the roles that different skill development plays in predicting youth civic engagement (Moon and Bai, 2020). For instance, among high-school-aged Korean students, media literacy skills are often the driving force behind civic engagement rather than technical ability to navigate technology. Understanding which types of knowledge and skills for which individuals can encourage civic engagement remains an important avenue for future research (Moon and Bai, 2020).

Finally, much literacy work is limited to educational settings. But the emphasis on education, while important, leaves out the majority of the population who are not in school or whose school days are long in the past. New research has tested the success of short literacy interventions that can reach these overlooked groups, but has only shown mixed success (van der Meer and Hameleers, 2022). In order to develop a better understanding of the implications of skill acquisition for youth civic engagement, researchers should pay more attention to non-WEIRD and non-educational settings.

It is also crucial to note that interest in politics continues to play a significant role in whether a young person's digital media use leads them to news consumption (Boulianne and Shehata, 2021), or to become politically engaged (Levy and Akiva, 2019). Ultimately, younger citizens' lower interest in politics will always remain a barrier to equal engagement, insurmountable by any degree of digital media innovation (Bode et al., 2017). Earlier research highlighted the connection between non-political, interest-driven online practices and political engagement, giving optimism to the idea that increased digital engagement would translate into civic engagement. However, scholars are increasingly of the position that non-political online practices do not necessarily convert to political mobilization (Matthes, 2022; though see Lee et al., 2020).

There is also ongoing conversation on the role of platform design in shaping youth political expression. Perceived platform affordances can create an environment or "civic laboratory" where young adults feel that they can safely explore political expression (Lane et al., 2019). Platforms that allow for anonymity result in a higher likelihood of expressing political opinions because of decreased concerns about political self-presentation (Lane, 2020) and social risk (Lane et al., 2019). While platform affordances can shield youth from real and imagined communities, they

can also provide access to a shared community of those with similar interests and beliefs, cultivating an environment ripe for collective political expression (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

As such, both individual and collective political expression can take on many digital forms (Literat and Klingler-Vilenchik, 2019; Penney, 2019), such as resharing a news article, creating a unique post or using a hashtag. Furthermore, young adults also tend to engage in online civic engagement and content creation practices that center on self-identity-related “restorying”, community building, and collective action (Wilf and Wray-Lake, 2021). In addition to creating their own content, young adults seem to be increasingly aware of the importance of uplifting and amplifying historically marginalized voices in digital spaces without further commentary. This is particularly visible when looking at the frequency in which BLM content is retweeted versus quote-tweeted by young adults on Twitter, compared to other age groups (Shugars et al., 2021).

Other types of political expression that draw on social and political issues might be more creative, visual expressions. One example is when a digital cultural artifact located on one platform can generate political expression both within and across several social media platforms. This was the case with a virtual representation of Trump’s border wall in the video game *Fortnite* (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Although memes demonstrate a questionable amount of political knowledge (McLoughlin and Southern, 2021), they are still perceived by some as an act of political participation in their creation (McLoughlin and Southern, 2021). While pop culture artifacts as catalysts for political expression are perhaps a novel, though limited, approach to generating increased political knowledge and participation, there is also a dark side. The humorous nature of memes often helps to cultivate a political aesthetic and obscure their potential as entry points to the socialization of alt-right, white supremacist, and other extremist ideologies amongst youth (DeCook, 2018, 2020).

These varied forms of expression and participation bring us to perhaps one of the most active and contentious areas of debate concerning young citizens and engagement – drawing the lines around what constitutes engagement and the legitimacy of activities with varying participation modalities. Clearly, a discussion of only news consumption and formal political participation (see Chapter 11) is no longer adequate to describe youth uses of digital media to participate in public life, and discussions over the levels of youth engagement depend increasingly on one’s definition of engagement. No longer is it sufficient to examine youth rates of voting, contacting public officials, contributing money, and following conventional news: young people now inhabit a political communication sphere in which their options are much more varied and include a host of opportunities to learn, share, and express ideas on topics. Virtual participation in traditional in-person activities has become more normalized during the pandemic. However, common terms to describe online-only engagement (e.g., sharing or liking political content, online petitions, boycotting or purchasing products that support a cause), such as “Slacktivism”, “clicktivism”, and “armchair activism”, are still frequently pejorative.

Moreover, the debate often extends to whether or not online participation translates into offline participation or vice versa (Boulianne and Theorcharis, 2020). In a UK-based study, Leyva (2017) found that frequent use of and exposure to politics on social media had a positive but weak relationship with offline engagement, both formal and activist. In contrast, there was a strong association between use and exposure with online “slacktivism”. Overall though, there seems to be a growing consensus that many young adults are engaging in “hybrid activism” as there is a strong relationship between youth engagement in online and offline civic activities (Boulianne and Theorcharis, 2020).

Lastly, it is worth noting that online-centered practices are essential in their own right, regardless of their connection to offline behaviors (Lane and Cin, 2018). Virtual participation allows engagement that might not otherwise exist offline, especially for those fearing reprisal from authoritarian governments (Otino, 2021) and youth dealing with accessibility issues. As we continue as a society to grapple with the ongoing pandemic as a “mass disabling event, in addition to state-sanctioned violence and police brutality” (Pomeroy, 2021), we must recognize that for many young people, especially those from historically marginalized populations, political engagement is often finely balanced with personal safety. Online engagement offers options for engagement that may not easily translate to offline activity, yet add to the growing importance and strength of youth support of social movements, filling a gap where there may not be a participatory contribution otherwise.

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION AND CIVIC EDUCATION

One area working especially hard to come to terms with these changes is that of political socialization and civic education. Socialization scholars have moved away from the transmission model of socialization, which focused almost entirely on the role of parents in fostering political attitudes (Niemi and Jennings, 1991). Instead, recent work recognizes the diversity of influences shaping young adults’ involvement in the political process and developing their political identity (Thorson et al., 2018). Similarly, emergent research highlights the wide diversity of ways parents and children can co-orient themselves towards the political process, moving beyond studies of transmission versus trickle-up socialization. Intra-family dynamics are more complex than simple transmission, and there are even cases in which youth seem to “socialize” their parents (Shehata and Amnå, 2019).

Although research has long suggested that mass media contribute to socialization by focusing attention on the political process and intersecting with parental, classroom, and peer discussions on the topic, the more complex media and online environment require scholars to differentiate between forms of online engagement. Within this field, particular attention has been paid to youth engagement on social networking sites, which often promote civic and political engagement (Heiss et al., 2020), and lead youth to diverge from their parents in political activism. This important online engagement may have several roots: the influence of peer discussion on polit-

ical and citizenship identities (Wegemer, 2022), the impact of supportive network ties on political participation (Maher and Earl, 2019; Terriquez et al., 2020), and the development of norms and “citizenship vocabularies” regarding appropriate political behavior and action (Bergan et al., 2022) and the ability to engage in self-expression and identity formation (Lane et al., 2019; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

This more complex media environment has also contributed to a renewed interest in civic education’s role in socialization. While earlier research found little impact of school on political socialization, more recent evidence suggests that strong civic curricula that encourage children to actively debate and discuss issues in class can play a vital role in socialization processes, particularly in conjunction with media exposure (Pontes et al., 2019). Similarly, researchers are increasingly emphasizing that schools can play an important role in helping youth develop the skills they need to interpret online information correctly (Bowyer and Kahne, 2020), as well as encouraging youth to both seek out and value exposure to diverse perspectives (Tully and Vraga, 2018), long recognized as important to promoting tolerance in the back-and-forth conflict inherent in the democratic process (Siegel-Stechler, 2021). Despite social media’s constant presence, in-school civic education continues to strongly influence youth political engagement (Ohme et al., 2020). Perhaps in response to youth digital dependence, gamification of civic participation (Hassan and Hamari, 2020) and interactive school media programming (Geers et al., 2020) are increasingly making their way into civic education.

Together, scholars have begun to develop a fairly robust measure of the forces expected to contribute to youth socialization into civic and political life. But despite the recognition that studying socialization is important because the orientations developed during youth tend to endure throughout the life cycle and shape engagement with politics (Thorson, 2012), scholars differ on a fundamental question: when are these orientations actually established? Are some ideological preferences genetically inherited, while others are socialized over time (Wajzer and Dragan, 2021)? Do children develop stable partisan attitudes aged 5 to 8 years, before they enter grade school (van Deth et al., 2011), or is adolescence the key time to observe changes in partisan identity (Rekker et al., 2017)? Does political interest stabilize by early adulthood (Russo and Stattin, 2017)? Does socialization occur gradually, in a linear fashion, as youth recognize their place in the political process, or does it occur in fits and starts during campaigns, building on the agenda-setting potential for the mass media to make political discussion salient (Kioussis et al., 2005)? Or perhaps the bigger question for the future is: for a generation that is inundated with so many pressing social issues, what role do events such as Black Lives Matter protests, school shootings, the pandemic, amongst many others play as socializing events for young people?

CONCLUSION

One of the most exciting things about research on young people's uses of digital media for political purposes is how often they, and the technologies they use, defy our expectations: it is more complicated than that. What we found time and again in our survey of the literature is that, first, almost all the "logical" assumptions about youth uses of digital media depend on a host of factors; and second, fully understanding this field will always be impossible without a rich appreciation for the social-political contexts young people inhabit. However, this is why we do research: to get to grips with these complexities and render them into something that occasionally resembles understanding. We have made the case that the field has made a good start in understanding how young citizens are situated to engage in digital politics. Nevertheless, there is much more research – and surprises, surely – ahead.

FURTHER READING

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