

# Civic engagement

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Civic Engagement and Political Awareness in the Youth of America Change is inevitable and the popular one hit wonder, Video Killed the Radio Star, echoes a nostalgic desire to appreciate the past. The simple, yet meaningful verse, “ we can’t rewind we’ve gone too far,” drives home the notion that the past is in the past, and one can only move forward. The song directly relates to technological changes in music at that time period.

The lyrics give the impression radio will be replaced by visually stimulating music videos; however, the future has proved that radio has not been replaced; music has merely been enhanced by the continuous change of technological advancements. Political scientist and professor, Robert Putnam illustrates in his book, *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital*, how one of the primary culprits in the decline of political awareness and civic engagement is the new media, for example, the Internet. Further studies suggest this is not necessarily the case.

Video Killed the Radio Star mirrors the relentless argument of whether the mass media has hindered or assisted in political awareness and civic activity in adolescents and young adults. The radio made people famous, and even after music videos became popular, music was still streamed through a radio and continues to be used to this day. Studies have shown that civic engagement and political awareness has declined, at all age levels, and yet there is evidence that the mass media can have a positive effect on cultivating social capital, especially in the interest of young voters in America.

The issue at hand is not mass media, but how mass media can be used as a means to stay informed on community issues and how it can create a sense

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of community. In the article, America's Youth and Community Engagement: How Use of Mass Media is Related to Civic Activity and Political Awareness in 14- to 22-Year-Olds, the authors begin by providing troubling evidence, "Voter turnout in congressional and presidential elections has dropped since 1960... Americans are less involved in political activities ranging from signing petitions to attending rallies" (Pasek, Kenski, Romer, and Jamieson 115).

Putnam compares the decline in civic engagement to the massive decline of bowling leagues; however, as bowling memberships are declining, the number of people bowling has increased. He explains the concept of a bonding capital and a bridging capital within the social capital as a whole. The theory of bonding and bridging can also be described in terms of strong ties and weak ties of networking.

Professors Homero Gil de Zuniga and Sebastian Valenzuela explored Putnam's research further in their article, The Mediating Path to a Stronger Citizenship: Online and Offline Networks, Weak Ties and Civic Engagement, finding it inclusive that bridging, or associating with weak ties provide one with a greater networking base, and therefore more information and resources. Bridging and weak ties are when an individual socializes with people who are different from themselves. Bonding and strong ties are individuals who are linked to each other on varying levels of intimacy; for example, one's inner circle of friends and family.

Putnam additionally points out that bonding and bridging strengthen each other. Because of the decline of bonding, there is a decline in bridging, which he links to the drop of organizational forms of capital due to the mass media. Like Putnam, authors Zuniga and Valenzuela agree that "larger networks  
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foster civic participation so long as they provide access to weak ties," yet they take into consideration that the internet is vast with diversity and is not " geographically bounded," and therefore " argue that the online context should be more strongly associated with weak-tie communication than the offline context" (405).

According to Zuniga and Valenzuela, this connection shows that internet based networks and weak ties will be more effective than the relationship between personal, offline networking and weak ties. The authors mentioned earlier, Josh Pasek, Kate Kenski, Daniel Romer, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson conducted a telephone survey to assess " 12 different uses of mass media as well as awareness of current national politics and time spent in civic activities" in respect to the youth and how mass media is related to political awareness and civic activity (115).

If the conclusion made by Zuniga and Valenzuela is accurate, then the new media will have a positive effect on the younger population's role in developing social capital. Historically, when print media flourished, it served as a way to stay in touch with the community of readers with no face-to-face interaction and " made possible the development of the modern nation state" (117). Internet is just another mechanism to build social networks, in which interpersonal communication is absent, like the newspaper.

However, unlike the newspaper, internet provides individuals with an extensive opportunity to network with people who are not in their inner circle, thus weak ties are created. Furthermore, Pasek, Kenski, Romer, and Jamieson examine how some forms of media are more effective than others, and explain how media that solely exists to entertain adolescents and young

adults can aid in promoting group activities with individuals that can share their experiences and develop a sense of community.

They are still experiencing social participation, even if the activity is not directly associated with civic activities. The authors evaluated the 12 different uses of mass media and assessed each media variable based on if it improved political awareness or civic engagement, or both. The researchers also included demographic predictors that would correspond with the study: age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. It is apparent that adults would have a higher amount of political knowledge. “ The average education level in our sample was 10. years of schooling... Of respondents, 78. 9 percent were currently students,” which would give them the edge since there are more opportunities to become involved in community service activities and clubs the schools have to offer. Some schools require community service to graduate. Socioeconomic status also plays a role in political awareness and civic engagement. This correlates directly to the fact that individuals who are wealthier have the resources and means to educate their children and are probably highly educated as well.

Race and gender is yet another factor in evaluating political knowledge and civic engagement, whereas “ whites appear more politically aware than Blacks, Hispanics, and other non-Whites... however, race has not been as strongly related in one direction or the other [in regards to civic engagement, and]... women, on average, belong to more associations and organizations than men but tend to exhibit less political knowledge” (123).

The results of How Use of Mass Media is Related to Civic Activity and Political Awareness in 14- to 22- Year-Olds, revealed that if media usage increased in <https://assignbuster.com/civic-engagement-process-essay-samples/>

frequency, it had a negative impact on political awareness and civic engagement, which is to be expected. Although reading remained positive, the results showed individuals took longer to develop a well-rounded political knowledge base if their reading increased. This is the cause of a decrease in active engagement with others. The authors could not predict if newspapers increased civic activity, however, it was evident that it increased political awareness.

Civic activity was strongly related to political awareness, and the findings also concluded that the Internet increased civic engagement, along with listening to news on the radio, following shows on television, and reading magazines. Not only were civic activities found to be directly related to political awareness, but the media had an overall positive effect on civic engagement and political knowledge. In his research, Putnam fails to assess new ways to approach civic engagement and political awareness, and instead looks to the old.

Relating civic engagement to the decline of bowling leagues seems futile to the reader, especially to a young adult. As society changes, activities change; people change. The youth of today are more interested in modern technology, which is why more candidates should reevaluate how they approach the younger generation in regards to the elections and make use of the Internet during elections. Because young voters are growing up in a time when technology is usually readily available to them, they look mostly to the web for political information.

Youth turnout for the 2004 elections showed “ marked increases. ” Most likely prompted by the war in Iraq, intense efforts were made to ensure

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younger generations were actively engaged throughout the campaigns. New media tools were also used, with websites put up that focused on attracting the younger population to politics; “ an estimated 28 percent of 18- 29-year-olds received most of their information about the campaigns via the Internet in 2004, making them the age group most reliant on new media for political information about the election” (Xenos and Bennett 444).

However, in the article *The Disconnection in Online Politics*, Michael Xenos and W. Lance Bennett stress the fact that although younger voters are participating online, they are less likely to visit a site that is sponsored by a specific party or electoral candidate. Unfortunately, politicians are very slow when adapting to the modern world of technology, and do not make use of the web to attract young voters. On sites like *Rock the Vote*, they give young voters access to interactive features, and yet links to websites with related political information and resources are not easily accessible.

Young voters only attain a morsel of information from youth engagement websites. Between 2002 and 2004, Xenos and Bennett conducted an extensive analysis of political sites that focused on youth involvement, as well as electoral sites, and they found the “ overall pattern is one of overlap” (456). The candidates’ websites were not designed to attract young voters. They merely addressed the same issues on their sites as seen on the youth sites; however, on the electoral sites they clearly were not reaching out to the younger population of voters.

Professional consultants correlate politicians’ indifference to youth voters because senior citizens have a higher voting rate. Xenos and Bennett express their disappointment, “ younger voters who ignore politicians largely

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do so because politicians largely ignore them” (457). It is ironic because voters are less involved in politics due to politicians’ lack of interest in their appeals, and politicians show disregard for the youth because of their low voting turnout and vice versa.

If politicians, our leaders, are putting the youth aside, who is going to devote the time to inform the younger generation of the importance on civic activities and political awareness? In correlation with the decline of adult involvement in social participation and volunteering, people simply do not have the time or energy to devote to their own needs, let alone join a civic organization. In today’s society, both parents work to make ends meet.

There are usually a higher percentage of female volunteers to male volunteers, but now that women are taking on raising children, housework, and working an additional 15 hours per week than men, the idea of becoming involved in community activities is overwhelming. The economy is in a stale state, and since the 1970s, the percentage of single mothers has increased dramatically (Freedman 246). Children are being isolated more often than not, which can also result in the disregard for community and civic engagement.

Mentoring programs are unreliable, and many adolescents and young adults are left in the dark without an adult role model: “ In his essay “ Building Community, John Gardner [Miriam and Peter Haas Centennial Professor at Stanford Business School] offers both consolation and wisdom about the historical process of community erosion and renewal... “ disintegration of human communities is as old as human history”... “ We can’t know all the forms community will take, but we know the values and the kinds of

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supporting structures we want to preserve. We are a community building species.

We might become remarkably ingenious at creating new forms of community for a swiftly changing world. ”” (Freedman 248) Robert Putnam insists on looking to the old, and if he must, he should look at the potential of civic renewal in the volunteering of senior citizens. Over the past thirty years, the population of Americans over the age of 65 has doubled and will continue to increase. Marc Freedman, the author of the article, Towards Civic Renewal, Journal of Gerontological Social Work, expresses his faith in the nation’s retirees to change the deterioration of volunteerism in the U.

S. , where children are in need of the most help. If children at an earlier age gained better insight into what it means to have a sense of community and belonging, they would have a better awareness of civic engagement and a broader knowledge base of politics on the state, local, and national level. Senior citizens also have the time, and there is evidence that implies older adults are looking to stay active in their communities; “ As one recent U. S Administration on Aging-sponsored survey reveals, a full 37. percent of older Americans say they would volunteer if asked, while an additional 25. 6 percent already volunteering indicate that they would like to devote more time to service,” and they prefer to work with the younger generation (Freedman 249). Not only will it help the children, but it will also help the senior citizens. 55 percent of seniors feel a sense of uselessness when they retire... a 25-yr National Institute of MentalHealthstudy finds, for example, that “ highly organized activity is the single strongest predictor, other than notsmoking, of longevity and vitality” (Freedman 250).

The local and federal government is known for lost proposals. Perhaps some of them would have been successfully planned out and put into action if accepted, and Freedman makes the idea of senior involvement seem feasible. Freedman provides the reader with examples of effective programs in community involvement created by the older population; one example is a “ union-sponsored initiative that helps nonviolent juvenile offenders find and keep blue-collar jobs. Freedman goes on to explain to doubtful readers that are thinking, where is this money going to come from? America’s budget is steadily falling into a rabbit hole, and yet the author is confident in the “ talent, experience and commitment” of older adults,” and their ability to organize well and get tasks completed quickly and effectively (252). Civic engagement and political awareness is declining because of the absence of an inspiring role model in the youth of today, and this program shows promise of creating a healthier sense of community for the older and the younger generations. Reiterating authors’, Homero Gil de Zuniga and SebastianValenzuela’s earlier consensus, the decline in civic engagement is not the consequence of the mass media and modern age of technology. The importance of weak ties through the Internet is actually seen through the web of networking that people from all over the world create, which ignites a stronger relationship in civic participation than networking face-to-face with weak ties.

This finding was reinforced by the study on various media uses in the article; How Use of Mass Media is Related to Civic Activity and Political Awareness in 14- to 22- Year-Olds, where the end result is conclusive with Zuniga and Valenzuela’s evidence. The media can enhance civic engagement and

political awareness if used sparingly and in the right context. " The mind is a double edged sword. It has immense power and it is capable of accomplishing both useful and destructive feats. " (Atharva Veda [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/atharva\\_veda/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/atharva_veda/)). It is not the media that is destructive.

The minds of the populace are ignoring the real issue at hand. The mind could be used more effectively in developing new ideas to encourage civic engagement and political awareness in the younger population. The media actually promotes civic participation and therefore is directly related to political awareness; overall the media has a positive effect on social capital. It is the communities' job to instill these values on the children so they can grow into informed adults and have their own opinions and ideas, passing those values onto their children and so on.

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