

Old Enough to Vote: The Effect of Lowering the Voting Age on Youth Civic Engagement

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University of Pittsburgh, 2021

Young people historically vote at the lowest rates, and political scientists have long assumed it's because they don't care about politics. However, other forms of youth political engagement beyond voting (such as protest) suggest otherwise. The more traditional, one-dimensional view of civic engagement as a measure of one's voting practices lacks an ability to capture changing trends in what civic engagement actually means, as it is fundamentally missing a deeper understanding of what issues matter most to young people and how they engage with those issues outside of voting. In order to account for and test this, we designed and carried out an experiment on high school students in Pennsylvania that hypothesized that creating and implementing a curriculum on the power of voting and the potential for the student subjects, themselves, to vote will increase students' interest in and attention to politics, government, and civic engagement. Ultimately, the data resulting from the treatment and control groups involved in the experiment produced a muddled picture of the impact of civic learning on young Americans' civic proclivities, beliefs, and actions. This led us to believe that the current generation's approach to government and civics may look, feel, act, and measure differently than contemporary politics as we know it. We suspect that the current political moment -- characterized by rising levels of civic and political engagement happening in concert with dropping levels of trust in government -- may be causing yet another generational shift in what it means to be civically engaged, resulting in experimental outcomes that appear counter to original hypothesis but, upon closer and more critical examination, actually falls in line with more

contemporary notions of what civic engagement itself means. The adjusted hypothesis we made in order to adjust for this was: As American students are exposed to more political knowledge and opportunities for civic engagement & learning, students become increasingly cynical and skeptical because the political landscape as it exists today is indeed skepticism-provoking and makes for a fertile environment for the growth of disbelief, disempowerment, and cynicism.

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1.0 Introduction

Apathetic, cynical, distracted, self-obsessed, materialistic, ill-informed, irresponsible, lazy. These descriptors -- repeatedly projected onto young people by older generations of political leaders and academics, alike -- attempt (and fail) to explain away young people's so-called disinterest and disengagement with politics, political systems, and, in the United States, the perpetuation of our democracy. While there certainly is concerning data (cite data) about young people's civic engagement practices (or lack thereof, particularly in regards to voting), the authors of this paper believe that this data does not tell the full story about youth civic engagement and the potential for the future of such. What's missing from this one-dimensional view of civic engagement is an assessment of young people's beliefs in our political systems and democratic institutions, a deeper understanding of what issues matter most to young people and how they engage with those issues outside of voting, and an assessment of the impact of a minimum voting age of 18 on those 16-17 years of age and younger.

This assessment on the current state of political science research on comprehensive understandings of youth civic engagement should not, however, insinuate that there is a lack of research and data on civic education, youth voting, and younger generations' involvement in existing political systems, generally. In fact, emerging data provides a rather hopeful picture for younger generations' political and civic engagement (or at least a more hopeful picture than that which popular political commentary provides by accusing young Americans as being apathetic, ill-informed, and lazy). In both the 2016 General Election and 2018 Midterm Election, the three youngest generations composed the majority of voters in the United States's electorate (the Pew Research Center states that in the 2018 Midterm Election: "Those ages 18 to 53... reported casting 62.2 million votes, compared with 60.1 million cast by Baby Boomers and older

generations”), proving that younger generations do indeed participate in voting at both a comparable and increasing rate (Cilluffo and Fry, 2019). Later research conducted by the Pew Research Center contends that beginning in 2020, one-in-ten eligible voters will be members of Generation Z (typically known as “Gen Z”). This is a critical statistic because according to Pew, Gen Z is “More racially and ethnically diverse than their predecessors: In 2020, Gen Z eligible voters are expected to be 55% white and 45% nonwhite, including 21% Hispanic, 14% black, and 4% Asian or Pacific Islander. By comparison, the Boomer and older electorate is projected to be about three-quarters white (74%)” (Cilluffo and Fry, 2020).

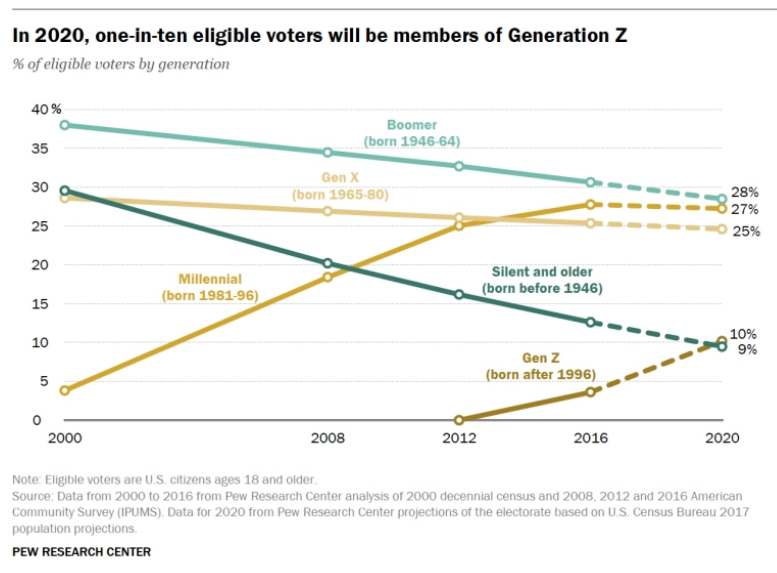


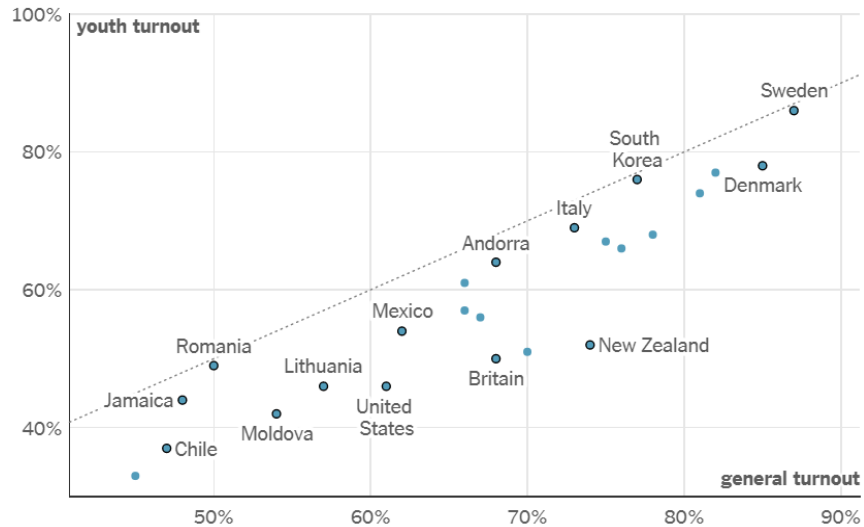
Figure 1 - Graph of Voting Eligibility by Generation

Besides being a notable demographic shift in the electorate generally, the racial and ethnic diversity of Gen Z has the potential to result in a generational lean towards liberal and/or progressive politics; an assertion based on previous research that revealed, “In 2016, nonwhite voters were more likely to back Democrat Hillary Clinton, while white voters were more likely to back Republican Donald Trump” (Cilluffo and Fry, 2020). Further, current research tells us that “52%-55% of youth voted in 2020, and their impact -- especially youth of color's

overwhelming support for Biden [in the 2020 General Election] -- was decisive in key races across the country” (CIRCLE, 2020). The same Tufts University-based research entity also states that they, “Previously estimated that youth voter turnout in 2016 was 42-44%,” proving the reality of real-time changing trends in youth civic engagement (CIRCLE, 2020).

When evaluating the current state of youth civic engagement and youth/young adult voter turnout, it is important to note that voting is widely regarded as a habitual phenomena. While this is valuable knowledge that has the potential to impact evaluations of any age demographic’s voting trends, the effects of voting as a habit has the greatest potential for impact in young people’s lives and lifelong practices of voting. In his research on youth voting and early voting habit formation, Eric Plutzer makes a case for a “Developmental Theory of Turnout” that relies upon two interacting factors -- “*Starting level* (the probability that citizens vote in their first eligible election) and *inertia* (the propensity for citizens to settle into habits of voting or nonvoting)” -- to explain why lowering the voting age might impact both current youth turnout and the lifelong turnout of those young people as they age (Plutzer, 2004).

We also know from existing research that while youth turnout in American elections may appear concerningly low, “In countries where overall turnout tends to be high among registered voters, turnout among those 18 to 29 tends to be high, too” (Symonds, 2020). And considering that, “Voter turnout in American national elections is far below the average of 80% of the eligible electorate that votes in other industrialized democracies,” we shouldn’t be surprised that youth turnout in the United States is also comparatively low (Powell, Jr., 1986).



Source: National election commissions and research agencies • By The New York Times

Figure 2 - Graph of Multi-Nation Electoral Turnout

Considering that all voter turnout -- including adult turnout -- is relatively low in the United States, it is also critical to note what effect lowering the voting age might have not only on newly enfranchised 16-17 year olds, but on other members of the electorate as well. Recent research by Jens Olav Dahlgaard of the Copenhagen Business School suggests that, “When young people vote, their parents are more likely to vote, too.” Though this research was not conducted on the United States electorate, the findings suggest that there is a small, yet substantive effect on overall voter turnout when teenagers gain access to the ballot. Dahlgaard’s research -- conducted via analyses of voter turnout datasets from multiple Danish municipalities across multiple (four) election cycles -- concludes that, “Parents are more likely to vote when their child enters the electorate. On average across all four elections... parents become 2.8 percentage points more likely to vote. In a context where the average turnout rate for parents is around 75%, this is a considerable effect” (Dahlgaard, 2018). Clearly, youth voter enfranchisement has the potential to impact voting trends not only of the youngest sector of the electorate, but of their parents as well.

2.0 Power & Potential of Youth Engagement

Beyond voting trends, some existing research has focused on education policies that might impact access to and success with civic education in its “traditional” form via mechanisms like coupling “high stakes testing” on civic knowledge with civics courses in American high schools. While introducing more standardized testing to high school students is, in and of itself, a controversial approach to (civic) education and worthy of its own study and analysis, the research did find that, “Having a civic education requirement of some type leads to more political knowledge, “ and, critically, that, “Civic education at school has a pronounced effect on groups that are marginalized -- either de facto or de jure -- within the American political system” (Campbell and Niemi, 2016). Similar research centered on a different approach to school-based civic learning -- peer-to-peer civic education -- also finds that civic engagement and education in school is, overall, a positive and important aspect of young Americans’ educational experience. Specifically, the authors of this peer-to-peer learning-focused study conclude that, “Especially encouraging is the ability to teach young people the importance of voting and the ways in which they can make a difference. The [peer-to-peer learning program utilized in the study] not only changed behavior, but it instilled new attitudes about the ability of young people to make their voice heard in government” (Shea and Harris, 2006).

Another relevant piece of research aimed at critically evaluating the historical nature and resulting sexist language used during Hillary Clinton’s 2016 Presidential bid (the first American election to see a woman receive a major party’s nomination for President) on young women’s civic beliefs and engagement found that, “For Democratic girls, the 2016 election was a case in

which frustration with the political status quo was channeled into greater engagement rather than a retreat from the public sphere” (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2019). The results of this study start to edge into a new territory for political science research: the redefinition of civic and political engagement, particularly as it is understood and acted upon by young people. The authors capture this sentiment and name a critical factor at play in young people’s relationship with contemporary American politics (anger), concluding their piece with the argument that, “It is likely that our measure of responsiveness is also tapping into a rise in anger, which is consistent with the fact that we see an increase in protest [participated in by Democratic girls]... Many who opposed Trump, especially women, have turned their disappointment into action -- from marching in the streets to running for office. As a result, Democratic girls have had other visible role models -- women marchers and organizers in their own families and communities -- for how to channel their political frustration after 2016.” (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2019).

Keeping all of this existing research in mind, to look at the world as it exists in 2021 and assume that young people are disconnected and disengaged from politics and social issues is not only to disregard changing trends in civic engagement generally, but to willfully ignore and write off the critical work of (notably and rightfully angry) youth organizers and activists. From [March For Our Lives](#) (and the wider gun violence prevention movement), to [Fridays for Future](#) and [Sunrise Movement](#) (and the wider climate justice movement), young people have been and will continue to be at the forefront of making social change. To resolve the cognitive dissonance associated with increased activism and decreased voter engagement (at least in comparison to youth voter turnout in other democracies), we must center a critical voice that has long been missing in the conversation about *why* youth might be engaging in politics, voting, and activism differently than past generations: the voices of young people, themselves.

3.0 Opportunities to Center Youth

Political science literature rarely focuses on the specific intersection between the three main factors impacting our understanding of young people's (particularly those 16-18 years of age) civic engagement or lack thereof: 1) availability, quality, and relevance of school-based civic education, 2) increasing rates of young people's civic interest and involvement beyond voting, and 3) the barriers young people face in being civically engaged, including the current American law requiring voters (and donors to political campaigns) to be at least 18 years of age. However, there is valuable research published that addresses various intersections between any two of these given factors, providing us with convincing evidence that this triple intersection is worth further investigation if we are to meaningfully center young people's voices in this space and truly understand how they participate civically and why.

For example, the study "Politics of Lowering the Voting Age in Australia" by Ian McAllister provides a convincing argument that, "Lowering the voting age will not in itself reverse increasing youth disengagement with traditional forms of political participation, but it does point to other ways in which such a change might take place." Ultimately, McAllister argues that our democracies (particularly those with unengaged and disengaged youth) have a need for, "A new set of cultural norms, eschewing a conception of citizenship based on duties and responsibilities and embracing a citizenship that uses direct action, works within a global framework, and is based on a holistic view of democracy" (McAllister, 2014). This is an important and potentially revolutionary conclusion, as it sets the stage for centering young people's conception of the world, and their place in it, in ongoing conversations and research on youth civic engagement and voter turnout.

If McAllister's conclusion is true -- and we believe that it is -- then the question at hand becomes: how do we redefine and reintroduce civic engagement to young people in a way that is accessible, relevant, and in-line with their voiced desire for agency, independence, and a fundamental rethinking of what it means to be an engaged citizen?

4.0 Civic Learning in the Classroom

Previous political science research has proven that civic education can increase social capital (Putnam 2001) and political participation (Hanmer 2009), but, as is discussed above, few American high schools prioritize civic education in a curriculum that is becoming more and more focused on standardized testing on topics other than civics. At the same time, Campbell and Niemi (2016) show that institutional changes -- such as state-level civic education requirements -- can increase the interest and awareness of youth in civic engagement. One proposal is to decrease the voting age to 16 in an effort to encourage youth to increase their civic engagement and knowledge (Martin 2012). Thus, for this project, we designed an original high school curriculum focused on teaching students about the importance and power of civic engagement, generally, as well as, more specifically, the steps they would need to take to lower the voting age in their state. Our hypothesis was that focusing the curriculum on the potential for the students themselves to vote would increase students' interest in and attention to politics, government, and civic engagement.

The curriculum itself (which can be found in Appendix A) consisted of three lessons to be taught by high school social studies teachers to their students (typically high school sophomores) over the course of no more than two weeks. The lessons included: 1) Expanding the Franchise – this lesson is tied around a PowerPoint presentation about the history of increasing

the numbers of people who can vote in the United States; 2) What Inspires You? – this lesson asks students to imagine themselves as change-makers and to learn about youth activism; and 3) Write your Representative – this lesson gives students an opportunity to engage in political behavior that the law already permits. Though the three lessons complemented and built upon one another, the goals for each individual lesson were distinct from one another. Lesson One, Expanding the Franchise, aimed to: introduce key concepts, such as parties and elections, federalism, and separation of power to the students; empower students to feel comfortable enough in their basic understanding of the US government in order to envision how they might be able to impact such; and introduce voting laws and what it would take to change them in order to enfranchise 16 and 17 year old Americans. Lesson Two, What Inspires You?, aimed to: encourage students to see themselves as potential change makers; show students that they and their classmates can think differently about what inspires them, and that that's desirable in democracy; and get students thinking about the kind of change they have already made in their communities and what they can continue to do. Lesson Three, Write your Representative, aimed to: allow students to become acquainted with the system by which they can communicate with their representatives and advocate for what they care about; empower students to take an active role in democracy and see themselves as part of something larger than just themselves; and show students that voting is important, but that civic engagement is possible at any age.

For the purposes of establishing causation and identifying the impact of the curriculum, itself, on the thoughts and beliefs of the students who engaged in all three lessons in the curriculum, half of the pool of Pennsylvania classrooms where the teachers opted into being part of this research project were given the three lesson curriculum and asked to teach it to their students then administer a survey about student civic engagement and political beliefs, while the

other half of the pool of Pennsylvania classrooms was not given the curriculum and instead asked to be the control group and simply administer the same survey to their students in order to establish a “baseline” understanding against which to measure the treatment group. In total, twelve teachers opted into being part of this research project, thus six classrooms became the treatment group (who received all three lessons of the civic learning curriculum) and the remaining six classrooms became the control group (who did not receive any lessons from the civic learning curriculum).

5.0 Testing Impact of Intervention

As is briefly alluded to above, in order to test the impact of the civic learning curriculum, we designed and implemented a 54 question survey (available in Appendix B) to be completed by all students across all of the classrooms participating in the research project. Of the 54 questions in the survey, 6 were basic demographic information questions, 36 were content questions about beliefs and behaviors regarding politics and political engagement, and the remaining 12 were knowledge-check questions. The content questions mostly centered around asking students how much they agreed or disagreed (and how strongly they agreed or disagreed) with statements about their own investment in politics, personal practice of various types of civic and political engagement, thoughts on age-based political engagement questions, trust in government and elected officials, perceptions of voter access and voter civic knowledge, stances on hot-button political issues, and the role young people can (and ought to) play in civics, government, and changemaking. In total, 270 Pennsylvania high school students completed the survey, roughly half of whom engaged in the civic learning curriculum, and roughly half of whom did not. The data resulting from the survey is presented and discussed below.

6.0 Findings & Results

Ultimately, the data resulting from the treatment and control groups produced a muddled picture of the impact of civic learning on young Americans' civic proclivities, beliefs, and actions. Oddly, we found that the civic learning curriculum treatment was sometimes effective (i.e. increased feelings of political empowerment and greater commitment to civic and political engagement) and sometimes counter-effective (i.e. decreased feelings of political empowerment and lesser commitment to civic and political engagement) in solidifying young people's political beliefs and increasing their levels of civic engagement and participation (and desire to engage in such). The data discussed below addresses and explains these findings, placing treatment and control group outcomes side-by-side in an attempt to identify the effectiveness of the treatment.

The only set of statistically significant findings that provided evidence for the effectiveness of the treatment was in response to the question of potential impactfulness of young voters. The statement, as written in the survey, read: "Things would be better if young people could vote." As can be seen from the graph below, the treatment group was measurably more in agreement with this statement than was the control group. However, it should also be noted that although the treatment group had more support for this statement than the control group, both groups still generally disagreed with the statement, meaning that whether the students engaged with the civic learning curriculum or not, they still did not believe things would be better if young people could vote, which is definitively evidence for the unempowered standpoint (and likely, internalized agism) from which the students approached the question.

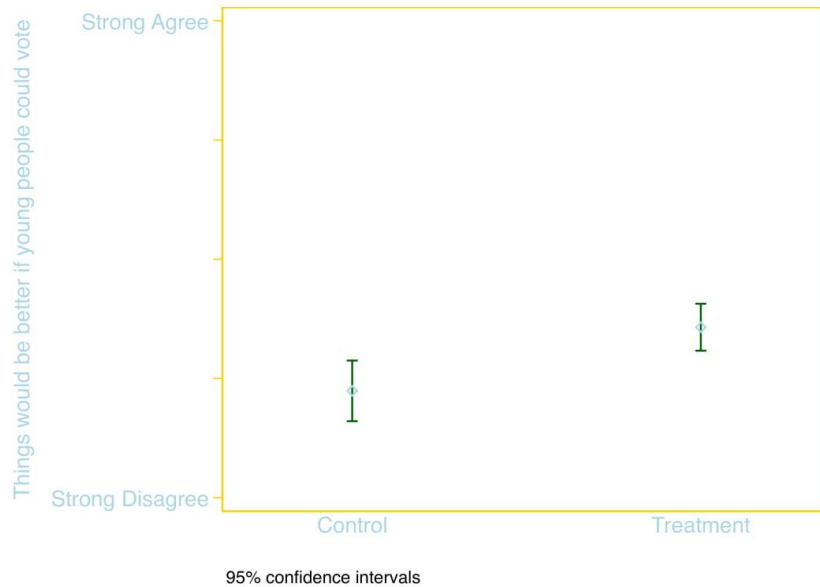


Figure 3 - Graph of Control versus Treatment Group Survey Response

For the remaining sets of findings, the evidence suggests that not only were the treatments ineffective, but (in a mild way) were counter-effective. The findings regarding the statement: “Public officials don’t care about people like me,” were such that the control group disagreed with the statement more than those in the treatment group. In essence, the treatment group -- after engaging in civic learning -- believed more strongly that their elected officials did not care about them than those who did not engage in civic learning.

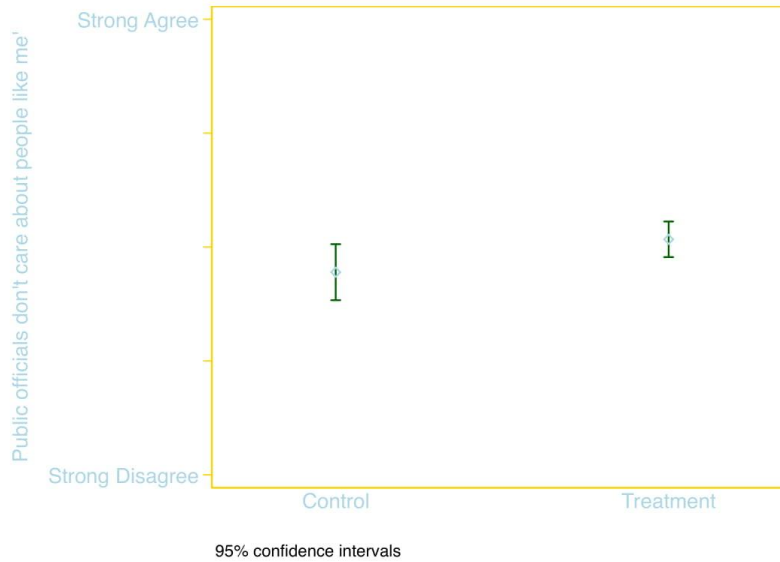


Figure 4 - Graph of Control versus Treatment Group Survey Response

The findings regarding the statement: “Voting is a duty,” showed that those in the treatment group believed less strongly in the idea that voting is a duty than did their control group counterparts. It should also be noted, however, that both groups generally agreed with the statement, meaning that the treatment group was simply less strongly in agreement.

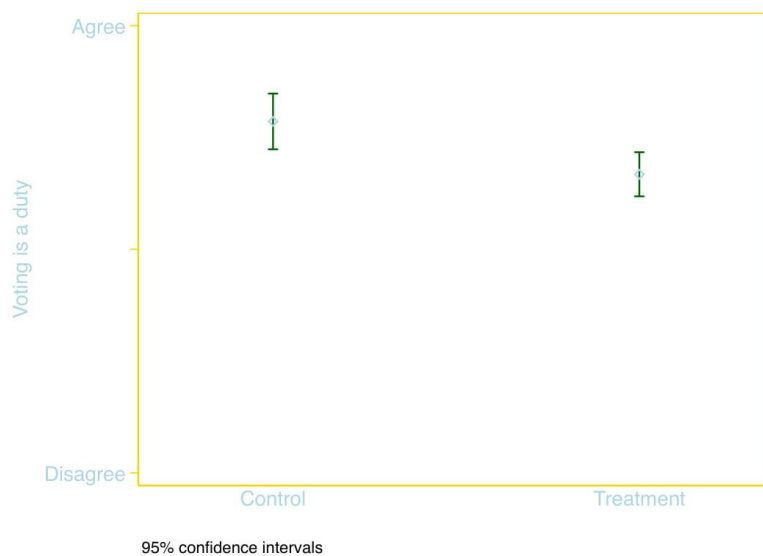


Figure 5 - Graph of Control versus Treatment Group Survey Response

The data resulting from the statement: “I plan to contact my elected official” was also consistent with the treatment causing counter-effectual outcomes that are exhibited above. Those who were in the treatment group reported being slightly less inclined to take action and contact their elected officials about the issues they care about than were those in the control group. It is critical to note, however, that those in the treatment group had already contacted their elected officials at least once, as the third lesson in the civic learning curriculum required it. This means that it is possible that the question was interpreted differently by the two groups, as the control group was being introduced to this idea for the first time, while the treatment group had already gone through the process of contacting their elected officials once.

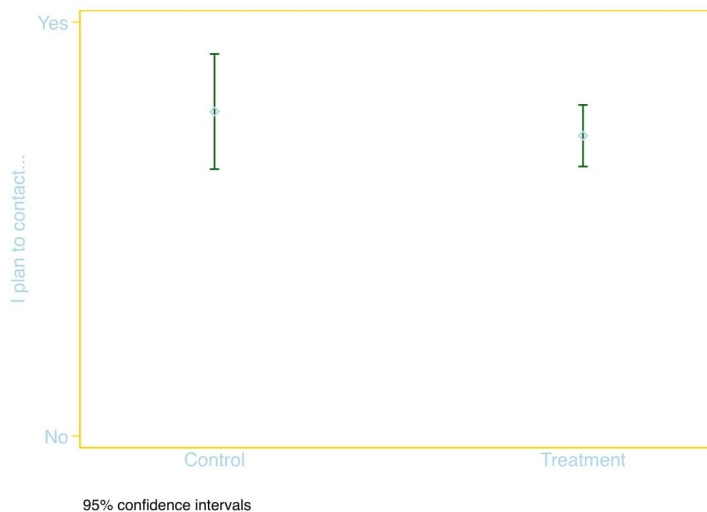


Figure 6 - Graph of Control versus Treatment Group Survey Response

The final set of data comparing control and treatment groups’ opinions and feelings on political involvement was centered around the question: “How interested are you in politics?” While the outcomes showed that the treatment group reported slightly lower levels of interest in politics than did members of the control group, we must note that both groups reported moderate to moderately high levels of political interest.

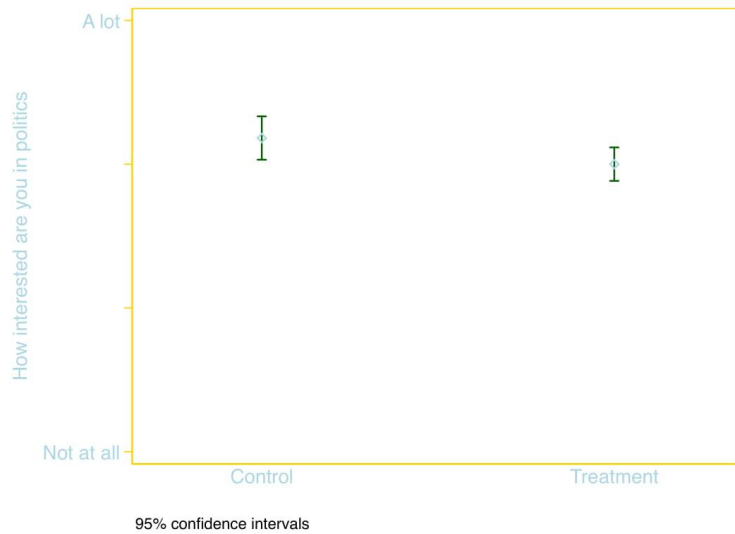


Figure 7 - Graph of Control versus Treatment Group Survey Response

These results, at first glance, may seem discouraging. After all, our hypothesis was that civic learning would inspire increased feelings of political empowerment and greater commitment to civic and political engagement, but most of our statistically significant data seemed to indicate the exact opposite. We suspect, however, the current political moment -- characterized by rising levels of civic and political engagement happening in concert with dropping levels of trust in government -- may be causing yet another generational shift in what it means to practice civic and political engagement. By this, we mean to suggest that this generation's approach to government and civics may look, feel, act, and measure differently than contemporary politics as we know it. While it still may be the case that the civic learning treatment truly did just have the reverse effect on students than that which was anticipated, it may also be the case that for this generation coming of political age in a world where the War on Terror has always existed, mass shootings are widely understood to be a real and present danger in any public area (including classrooms), the climate crisis is reaching an irreversible point, wealth inequality is more pronounced and problematic than ever, a global pandemic is a real threat, and a reality talent game show host is President of the United States, perhaps we should

not be so surprised that their view of politics and changemaking is different from that of older generations. Thus, we put forth an adjusted hypothesis: as American students are exposed to more political knowledge and more opportunities for civic engagement and learning, the students become increasingly cynical and skeptical because the political landscape as it exists today is indeed skepticism-provoking and makes for a distinctly fertile environment for the growth of disbelief, disempowerment, and cynicism.

As a possible source of evidence for this adjusted hypothesis, we turn to the students' survey responses detailing the issues they believe to be most important and to be causing the most harm in the United States. Of all of the answers given to this open-ended (that is to say, entirely without pre-chosen options) question, the following issues were named most often by students as being, in their minds, the most important issues the United States faces today:

Table 1 - Ranking of Teens' Self-Reported Concerns regarding Salient Political Issues

ISSUE PRIORITIES	
Issue	Number of students reporting issue as biggest concern for US
Coronavirus	34
Climate Change	27
Political Division	27
Immigration	21
Healthcare	15
Debt	13
Gun violence	10
Poverty	9

Racism	8
Abortion	8
Illegal immigration	7
Economy	7
IR	7
Politicians	6
Wealth Inequality	5

Knowing that issues like Coronavirus management, climate change, healthcare, gun violence, and more are at the forefront of students' minds, we can see how issues of personal safety, temporal longevity, and bodily autonomy/safety might influence what these students believe to be important issues and effective means of changemaking. After all, how can we expect a generation that constantly feels threatened and unsafe to feel more safe and secure as they learn about the very systems of government (and the politicians who run it) that have, for the entirety of their lives, failed them? Maybe we need to stop assuming that cynicism will result in inaction, and acknowledge that maybe, students are uninterested in electoral systems and traditional political engagement because the system they're supposed to buy into has quite literally done nothing for them (except to traumatize them and their loved ones).

In our opinion, it is far past time to revisit what we consider to be increased civic engagement when such is put in conversation with its backdrop of a flailing democracy where money, influence, and whiteness are well known to be proxies for power. By this, I mean that if for this generation, protesting, engaging in self education, partaking in boycotts, losing blind faith in political systems, and the like are signs of being more highly civically educated and deeply civically engaged (as opposed to more traditional behaviors that might indicate such, like

voting, volunteering on political campaigns, writing to elected officials, etc...), then so be it. It is up to us, as researchers, to recognize these changing trends and account for them in our work, rather than blindly following what our data seems to be telling us. We need a new perspective -- a new paradigm, if you will -- to account for what civic and political engagement looks like and feels like (or, less generously, what it *could* look like and feel like) during an era of mass social upheaval, deep partisan divide, and near-constant tragedy.

7.0 Remaining Questions

Critically, the lessons in the civic learning curriculum were taught mid-February through early-March of 2020, with all of the survey responses having been completed by mid-March of 2020. This timing is important to note for two reasons. First, the experiment was conducted *before* the first set of lockdowns due to the global COVID-19 pandemic hit American cities, meaning that the lessons were taught and surveys completed before the massive political, economic, and social upheavals -- none of which we yet know the full impacts of -- brought on by the pandemic were felt. Second, the experiment was completed and data gathered ahead of the highly visible, deeply impactful political happenings of the remainder of 2020 and beginning of 2021, including: the highly visible murders of unarmed Black Americans -- such as Elijah McClain, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd -- by police officers and the subsequent second wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, the November 2020 electoral victory of Joe Biden over Donald Trump for the US Presidency, the January 6, 2021 Capitol siege and attempted coup carried out by far-right extremists, and more. All this is to say, our social, political, economic, and physical worlds are drastically different (and, arguably, more intense) now than they were when the curricula were taught and surveys were distributed. In order to account for these

changes, this same experiment would need to be run multiple semesters and/or years in a row to identify and tease out what impact, if any, the past year has had on what it means to be civically engaged and politically active as a young person in the United States.

Beyond concerns over the yet unaccounted for effects of changing political landscapes, dramatic current events, and a general population-wide increase in political awareness on the research at hand, there is also a deeper, more epistemic question to be addressed. The aforementioned, adjusted hypothesis that as students are exposed to more knowledge about the American political system, the students become increasingly cynical and skeptical because the political landscape as it exists today inspires cynicism from those of all political stripes remains just that: a hypothesis. In order to test and confirm this new hypothesis, altered versions of the civic learning curriculum and online survey used to conduct this original iteration of research would need to be deployed, and additional data analyses on the results from such would need to be performed. Many more rounds of this experiment would need to be conducted -- preferably on even more students, across a wider geographic area to have a larger sample size and more representative sample population to work with -- in order to determine why exactly the students with more civic education report feeling less engaged in political actions like voting, more disillusioned with elected officials, and less interested in empowering themselves and other young people to claim a spot at the (metaphoric) political table.

Finally, there are questions related to the role that hyper-partisanship and the anti-intellectual sentiment of the American political right may have played in students' perceptions of the survey and project itself, let alone any specific questions or ideas within the survey. Continuing to conduct this research over the course of many years would allow us to not only tease out the nuances of specific phenomena, but also to help identify what patterns and

data points are a reflection of partisan identity, and which are legitimate insights deserving of attention and focus in their own right.

8.0 Conclusion

For all that can be said about young people and civic engagement, what cannot be said is that they don't care or aren't paying attention. Though we were originally anticipating that exposing students to a three lesson civic learning curriculum would empower them via new knowledge and inspire them to become more civically or politically engaged, the new hypothesis we adopted after analyzing the data from the survey is potentially more valuable. We were not anticipating tapping into the issue of generational shifts in what being engaged politically means, but after seeing how almost all of our statistically significant data suggested that the treatment group of students who were taught the civic learning curricula became dissuaded, disaffected, and disempowered, we came to the realization that learning more about the political systems that uphold the brokenness of our nation may inspire cynicism and negativity, but that cynicism and negativity do not necessarily mean that the treatment did not work, or that the student test subjects were simply uninterested in politics. Instead, these findings suggest that the current generation of high school students has grown up in a democracy that is failing in real time, and that increased negativity about the state of the nation and our power to do something about it may be the natural next step after becoming more educated about such failing systems.

The work, however, is far from over. We need additional rounds of curriculum teaching, survey distribution, and data analysis to even begin to seriously consider our adjusted hypothesis.

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Appendix A - PS:0200 Civic Engagement Assignment Overview

This document provides information on the civic engagement curriculum materials you have received. Please use these materials in your class some time within the next two weeks, but you do not have to use them in the order suggested below. Please contact me (Kris Kanthak) at kanthak@pitt.edu with any questions, comments, or concerns.

1. Lesson One: Expanding the Franchise – this lesson is tied around a PowerPoint presentation about the history of increasing the numbers of people who can vote in the United States. The key concepts here are:

- a. Parties and Elections: Political parties are essentially private organizations with ballot access. This is why only members of a particular political party can vote in primary elections in Pennsylvania. But state parties could decide to change those rules and let new people vote in their primaries –from non-party members to ineligible voters such as immigrants and prisoners to people younger than 18 – any time they wanted to do so.
- b. Federalism: The Constitution is clear that states decide the “Times, Places, and Manner” of federal elections. A state, then, could decide to extend the franchise to new voters whenever it wants.
- c. Separation of Powers: The Constitution says that courts have a say over what other branches do. The courts have been clear that states cannot withdraw the franchise from people who have a Constitutional right to vote. In other words, Pennsylvania could not pass a law saying women weren’t allowed to vote, but it

could pass a law saying 16-year-olds are allowed to vote. Expanding the franchise is much easier than contracting it.

2. Lesson Two: What inspires you? – this lesson asks students to imagine themselves as change-makers and to learn about youth activism. The assignment includes links to two articles that profile some examples of youth activists. Note that several of the examples are activists who are left-of-center, but others are less obviously ideological. For examples of more obviously conservative youth activists, consider Kyle Kashuv, Breann Bates, or C.J. Pearson.

- Detailed procedure for lesson: file:///C:/Users/14406/Downloads/What_Inspires.pdf

3. Lesson Three: Write your representative – the goal is to give students an opportunity to engage in political behavior that the law already permits. Students are asked to choose a representative and to write a letter to that representative about an issue important to the students. The assignment will include thinking about levels of government and to whom one should address a letter about a particular concern. One conversation could be about to whom one could write if one wanted to lower the voting age, but Note: the website <https://www.commoncause.org/find-your-representative/> allows users to find their representatives at all levels and includes links to representatives' web sites.

- Detailed procedure for lesson: file:///C:/Users/14406/Downloads/Writing_Reps.pdf

Appendix B - Survey

https://pitt.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3NU8ByIOmHmQlnf