

**A New Engagement?  
Political Participation,  
Civic Life, and the  
Changing American Citizen**

*Cliff Zukin, et al.*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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Civic Life,  
and the Changing  
American Citizen

Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter,  
Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins,  
and Michael X. Delli Carpini

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
A new engagement? political participation, civic life, and the changing American citizen /  
Cliff Zukin . . . [et al.].  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978-0-19-518316-0; 978-0-19-518317-7 (pbk.)

ISBN 0-19-518316-9; 0-19-518317-7 (pbk.)

1. Political participation—United States. 2. Citizenship—United States. 3. Civil society—United States. I. Zukin, Cliff.

JK1764.N488 2006

323'.042'08420973—dc22 2005025374

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

*To my ladies: Debbie, Hannah, and Rachel*

CZ

*To four fine GenXers: Brad, Ethan, Eric, and Hunter*

SK

*To my mother, Sandra Sonner*

MA

*To Sean, and the newest citizen in my life, Zoe Claire*

KJ

*To my father, Domenick*

MXDC

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## Preface

*A New Engagement?* is about the intersection of two important highways of American political life. The first is the nature of citizen engagement—its amount, quality, and health; the second is the nature of political and societal change through generational differences and population replacement. Our goal in writing this book is to tell a generational tale of citizen engagement at the millennium, focusing largely on those under 40 years of age, using their elders for contrast. We offer a first look at a new generation of citizens, aged 15 to 27, whom we call the DotNets. And we offer the first systematic, comprehensive look at political participation in the post 9/11 era.

Let us state a clear bias at the outset: we believe *citizen engagement matters*. We believe it is better to be involved than not, and that the transmission of the value of engagement from one generation to the next is the responsibility of all of us. After all, no one spends such time, energy, and money studying a problem they believe to be unimportant. We were motivated to better understand, explain, and hopefully contribute to the reversal of the disconnection of young people from the political process. But while the choice of a research problem is not value-free, the means of studying it must be. In addition to being citizens and teachers, we aspire to be counted as scholars. Though the authors have different backgrounds, we all worship at the altar of empiricism. We strive to make our observations dispassionately, and without regard for what we would like to find.



A main story avenue is that the generational chain of engagement has been broken, at least in the electoral realm. In this case the newcomers look very much like their predecessors, Generation X. They are quite removed from the arena of traditional political participation, and the finding that sizable portions of two successive generations have now opted out of electoral political life portends a less attentive citizenry and potentially dire consequences for the quality of our democracy.

However, we believe another important contribution of the book is to distinguish *political* from *civic* engagement. And in the more private, civic sphere of activity—volunteering, being active in one's community, and using the economic muscle of consumerism—these younger citizens are quite active. Indeed, when viewed through this prism even Generation X, often held up as the poster child for poor citizenship, hasn't turned out to be as detached as widely believed. And, we find some evidence that the DotNets may be reversing the generational slide into political indifference. In the end, we're not sure if the glass is half-empty or half-full. In some measure, it depends whether one is pouring or drinking. We will let our readers judge for themselves.

Almost all of the data presented in *A New Engagement?* were collected by the authors in the course of the National Youth Civic Engagement Index project, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Ours has been a four year journey, beginning in January 2001 and finishing with a completed manuscript in the summer of 2005. We started by convening two panels of experts, many of whom worked with politically active youth on a daily basis, in March and April of 2001. We felt it important to start *tabula rasa*: we knew little about how young people were active in the civic and political life of the country, and wished to be blinded by no presumptions. Taking what we learned from these discussions, we conducted 13 focus groups during May and June of 2001 in four different regions of the country—the Midwest, Northeast, South, and West. Most groups were conducted with people from a single generation, with a greater number of groups conducted with DotNets and GenXers. But we talked with others as well. With the assistance of Knowledge Networks we then conducted a web-based probability survey of 1,200 15- to 25-year-olds in January and February of 2002. Our questionnaire focused on volunteerism, assorted civic and political behaviors, attitudes toward politics, and high school and college experiences.

With a greater sensitivity to the experiences of both young and old, as well as the nuances of question wording, we launched our primary data collection activity, the National Civic Engagement Survey—a nationwide telephone survey of 3,200 respondents ages 15 and older in April and May of 2002, fielded by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalas, Inc. (SRBI). To gauge the reliability of our results and to explore some unexpected findings from the initial survey, we subsequently conducted a second national telephone survey shortly after the 2002 national elections, interviewing a random sample of 1,400 adults (this time 18 and over) between November 14–20 of 2002. Half of this was fielded by SRBI and half by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI) to test various methodological issues. We also made use of a variety of other national and statewide surveys to augment our primary data collection activities, as appropriate.

*A New Engagement?* has five owners. The idea was initially developed by Cliff Zukin and Scott Keeter, longtime collaborators, with the encouragement of Michael X. Delli Carpini. At the time Delli Carpini was director of the Public Policy program at The Pew Charitable Trusts. Molly Andolina joined Zukin and Keeter as one of the three co-principal investigators on the grant, and Krista Jenkins later joined as the project manager. Delli Carpini joined the author group in time for the writing of this manuscript upon his move from Pew back to an academic perch. We've listed the authors in the order of joining the research team; all five of us were intimately involved in writing the book.

## Acknowledgments

We have an unabashedly long list of acknowledgments. It would be impossible for the five of us to have come on such a long journey without incurring heavy debts along the way. We first want to thank The Pew Charitable Trusts, who awarded us a grant to explore civic engagement through a generational prism. Tabitha (Tobi) Walker, our program officer, was a delight to work with. Subsequent to awarding us this grant, Pew funded CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, and we've reaped benefits through contact, feedback, and encouragement from Carrie Donovan, Bill Galston, Emily

Kirby, Peter Levine, Mark Hugo Lopez, and Demetria Sapienza, among others at the Center.

Second, we want to recognize our institutions. Both George Mason University, where Keeter began the project, and Rutgers spent copious time on grant and contract administration, and we're especially indebted to the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, as well as to the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers. We're also appreciative of the support of DePaul University, its political science faculty, staff and students, Fairleigh Dickinson University, and the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania.

Third, we are indebted to a number of professional colleagues who are scattered about, including Liz Beaumont, Lance Bennett, Deborah Both, Harry Boyte, Henry Brady, Richard Brody, David Campbell, Beth Donovan, Tom Ehrlich, Ivan Frishberg, Cassandra Harper, Sheilah Mann, David Moore, Linda Sax, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Merrill Shanks, David Skaggs, Judith Torney-Purta, and Lori Vogelgesang. At Rutgers, valued colleagues included Jocelyn Crowley, Jane Junn, Rick Lau, and especially Alan Rosenthal. And, the biggest thank you to Michele Horgan! At the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Peyton Craighill, Michael Dimock, Andrew Kohut, and Nilanthi Samaranyake lent their keen eyes to the enterprise.

Fourth, we had some of the best minds in survey research to bounce ideas off of and oversee our data collection activities. Thanks to Mark Schulman and Chintan Turakhia of SRBI, G. Evans Witt and Jonathan Best of PSRA, Mike Dennis, Michael Dender, and Bill McCready of Knowledge Networks.

The graduate research assistants who have touched the project while passing through Rutgers have been a privilege to teach and learn from. With very deep gratitude for contributions more than they probably know, a heartfelt bow to Rachel Askew, Dana Birnberg, P. Markley Craighill III, Allison Kopicki, Rebecca Moore, Kelly Sand, Rob Suls, and Tiffany Turner.

At Oxford, we had the good fortune to be guided by Dedi Felman, Laura Lewis, and Linda Donnelly. We thank them for their substantive suggestions and for getting the book out in a timely way.

At most, we owe our respondents more than we can say. All told, we interviewed about 5,800 people in our three major data collection activities, and probably upwards of 7,000 including our pilot testing on state-

wide surveys in New Jersey and Virginia, not including the hundred-plus who sat around focus group tables to help us figure out the genes and experiences that lead to civic engagement. Thanks to each of these individuals for giving us more than 2,500 hours of collective time, answers, and insights, without which these pages would be blank.

At last, we acknowledge each other. The book has truly been a collaborative project, and a joyful one at that. In addition to our seven chapters, this period produced four new jobs, four new houses, four (obviously new) babies, and five very close friends along the way. We share with pride whatever contribution *A New Engagement?* makes along with whatever errors may be between the covers. The final word of thanks goes to our spouses, families, friends, and pets. It's been a long time.

All data gathered by the authors for this research (NCES<sub>1</sub>, NCES<sub>2</sub>, and NYS) are available on the web site of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at <http://civicyouth.org>

—Cliff Zukin  
New Brunswick, October 22, 2005

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A New Engagement?

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## Introduction

The nature of citizen engagement in public life in the United States is changing. Citizen participation both determines who will hold positions of government power and communicates the public's values and opinions to these officials. Consequently, changes in the nature and scope of participation affect the quality of our democracy. A consistent theme of social and political analysis over the past four decades has been the gradual disengagement of the American citizenry from public life, and especially from traditional political participation. This apparent decline has been greatest among the youngest Americans, who have historically been the least engaged. But we believe these generalizations may be misleading.

In this book we describe levels and patterns of political and civic participation, and the variety of ways people make their voices heard in the political arena. We conduct our examination through the prism of generational differences among those living in the United States today. We argue that citizens are participating in a different *mix* of activities from in the past, and that this is due largely to the process of generational replacement. We believe the volume of citizen engagement has not declined so much as it has spread to a wider variety of channels. And this may require different listening skills among political and social analysts to correctly measure the decibel level and fully understand the messages being sent.

The 2004 election notwithstanding, voter turnout among young citizens has been declining over the past three decades while remaining stable among older people. In contrast, however, younger Americans are relatively active in the *civic* arena, and there is evidence that this participation is growing. Aided in part by the Internet, young people are matching their elders in the public expression of their civic voices. And their participation involves an intriguing combination of continuity with the past mixed with a variety of new perspectives.

What is driving these changes in participation? The last 40 years have been marked by a series of political events and trends that have had a profound impact on the way American politics and government are perceived by citizens. High-level government scandals and unpopular wars have eroded public trust in the honesty and sagacity of leaders. Antigovernment and antipolitical rhetoric has dampened Americans' belief in the relevance of government for solving problems. National elections still matter—some would say more than ever—but gerrymandering at the state and local level has rendered most legislative districts uncompetitive, relegating real competition to the intraparty struggles for nomination when incumbents retire or are perceived as straying from party orthodoxy. Government and politics increasingly seem, to paraphrase Schattschneider (1942), a song sung by and to elites and special interests. At the same time, a growing shift in power and responsibility to the private and non-profit sectors from government has further dampened the resonance of traditional politics.

We are not arguing that this new version of participation substitutes seamlessly for the old. Indeed, we believe that active participation in elections remains one of the most important venues for citizen input, and in this arena younger Americans still lag behind. Nonetheless, the changes we document in this book are consequential, and paint a very different picture from either the usual laments of a disengaged, apathetic public or the static posture that little if anything has changed. Many Americans are now engaged in a range of public activities that go beyond participation in traditional electoral politics. About as many people undertake civic activities as electoral ones, and the collective amount of time spent in civic work probably greatly exceeds the time devoted to purely political activity. A significant segment of the public eschews voting and campaigning and concentrates on civic activities such as volunteering and community problem solving with others. Just as organized

interest groups are increasingly doing, many Americans also engage in public affairs by giving voice to their opinions through the media, through direct contacts with other citizens, through contact with public officials and policy makers, and even through their choices as consumers. In short, we argue that, for better or worse, we are witnessing the emergence of new patterns of public engagement that are already affecting the nature of politics in contemporary America and that, absent direct intervention or unforeseen events, promise to continue to do so well into the future.

Of course none of this is written in stone, and the full story of trends in participation is a complicated narrative. Consider, for example, participation in American national elections. Despite the uptick in 2004, voter turnout has been at best stagnant over the past 30 years, despite growing levels of education and greater citizen access to news and information (McDonald 2001). Turnout among young people dropped after 1972, declining nearly 15 percentage points between 1972 and 2000, resulting in a larger gap between younger and older citizens (Levine and Lopez 2002).

This pattern was interrupted in 2004. The presidential contest that year was marked by sharply higher citizen engagement, driven by divisive but important issues, as well as an unusually high degree of personal and partisan bitterness and rancor. Accompanying the strong emotions of the campaign were new and broader efforts to mobilize voters by both sides. And there was a special focus on turning out younger voters. Perhaps in response to both the general uptick in mobilization and the specific efforts aimed at them, turnout among younger citizens increased more than among older ones (see fig. 1.1). More younger citizens were active in the election in other ways as well. It is hard to know at this juncture if 2004 was an anomaly or a harbinger of further positive change. At the least, it demonstrated that youth may be willing to participate if the effort is made to draw out that participation.

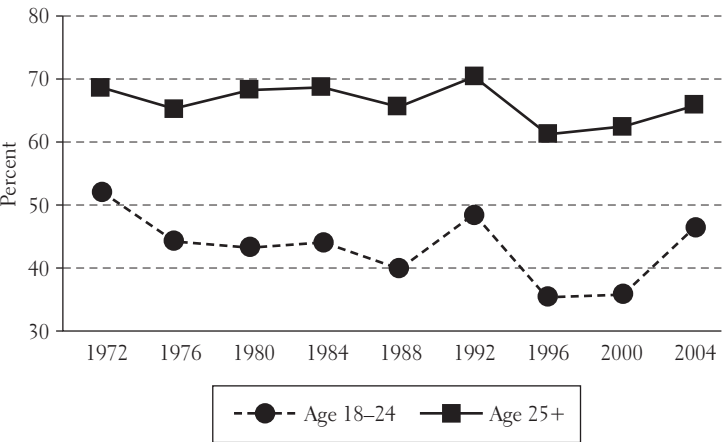
## The Civic-Political Divide

While there are numerous ways to categorize the various kinds of citizen involvement in public life, in this book we identify and focus on what we believe is a potentially important fault line in citizen engagement:

the distinction between political and civic participation. Following Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, we define political engagement as “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 38). Voting is the most important activity within this domain, but it also includes activities such as working for a candidate or party, trying to convince someone how to vote, or working (individually or collectively) to affect the making or implementation of public policies by officials. Political engagement has long been marked by significant age differences, with younger citizens much less active. Figure 1.2 shows the scope of age differences in voting and general attention to government and public affairs.

The lower level of youth engagement in the political world has consequences. Currently, the youngest cohort of citizens is more liberal and Democratic than the rest of the electorate. As a result, the 2004 election would have been even closer had younger voters turned out at the same rate as older ones. And if young people had come out to vote at the same rate as their older counterparts, we believe Al Gore would have defeated George W. Bush in the 2000 election for president.<sup>1</sup>

FIGURE 1.1  
Trends in voter turnout.

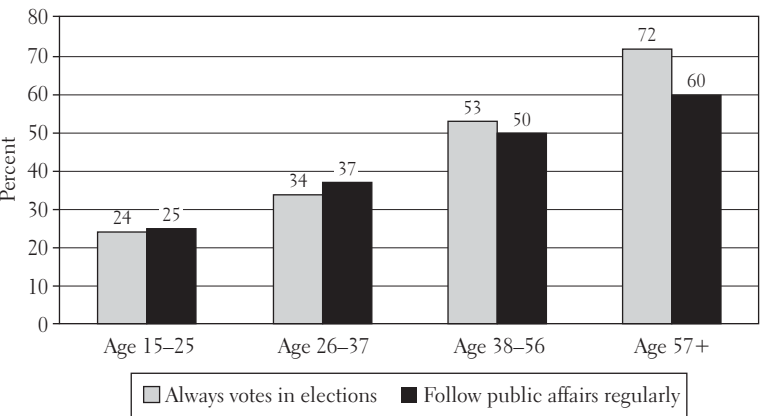


Source: Center For Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

In contrast to political engagement, civic engagement is defined as organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others. It includes a wide range of work undertaken alone or in concert with others to effect change. Unlike the situation with political engagement, young people match their elders in many aspects of civic engagement, an avenue of participation increasingly encouraged by the schools and facilitated by parents and community organizations. As figure 1.3 shows, the percentage of young Americans engaged in regular volunteer activity nearly equals that of their Baby Boomer parents. And our qualitative evidence provides many examples of volunteering and other civic activities in which youth are taking part. In focus groups we conducted across the country we found some of those young people who eschew voting were nevertheless involved in an impressive variety of activities that speak in a different voice.

- We met “Larry,” 20, living in Chicago. Although eligible to vote, he did not do so in 2000. But confronted with the problem of a driver who repeatedly sped at “eighty miles per hour” down his neighborhood street filled with children, he worked through local government filling out forms and getting neighbors to sign a petition in order to get authorization for “Chil-

FIGURE 1.2  
Political engagement by age.



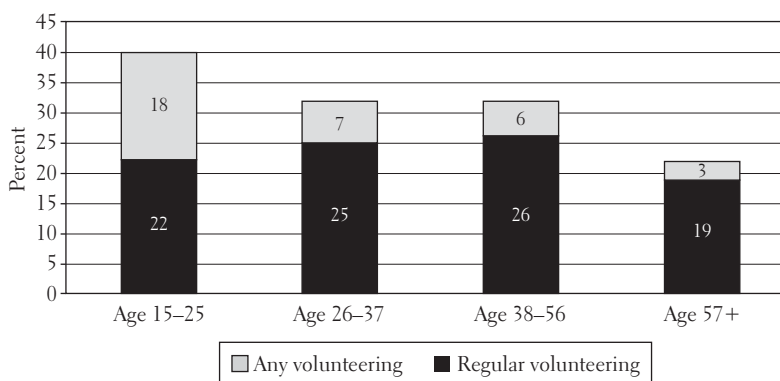
Source: NCES1 Survey.



dren at Play, Slow Down” signs to be put up. When the signs didn’t slow down the driver, he went to his local police to convince them to stake out the area at the appropriate time. They caught the driver, who, Larry said, had alcohol on his breath and drugs in his car.

- In California we met “Alex,” who described himself as one of “a lot of us who aren’t getting into the political arena.” But he went on tell us how he exercised his lone, unorganized voice as a consumer in everyday life: “You just don’t buy it. I don’t like the way Nike does business. I don’t buy Nikes . . . I don’t buy Exxon gas, unless I’m out of gas and it’s the only gas station around. . . . because of the way they handled the cleanup [of the Exxon Valdez] and everything they did up there” [in Alaska].
- In North Carolina it was “Erin,” 28. Although she did not vote in 2000, she was very active in an organization of breast cancer survivors, “Save Our Sisters.” She got involved, as she noted in our African American focus group, because “even though Caucasian females have a higher rate of breast cancer, the mortality rate among black women is greater because a lot of [our] people don’t go and get mammograms and checkups.”

FIGURE 1.3  
Volunteerism by age.



Source: NCES1 Survey.

The changes we are seeing in how and how much citizens engage in the public sphere raise two sets of questions that guided our research. The first revolves around the nature of citizen engagement itself. What does “citizen engagement” entail in twenty-first-century democracies such as the United States? This is a question that has no simple answer—as is attested by the myriad of existing and often competing theories of democracy and empirical measures of participation (Brady 1999; Dahl 1989; Hanson 1985; Morone 1990; Pateman 1970). We do our best to capture as wide a range of civic and political activities as possible—from consumer boycotting to voting in presidential elections.

A second and more normative question regarding the nature of citizen engagement is “What kinds of participation are ‘best,’ both for individuals and for the polity more broadly?” Two polar stances might be considered. First, rather than assuming that a particular kind of participation (for example voting) is inherently more important than others (such as nonpolitical volunteering) or that citizens *must* engage in certain kinds of activities to fulfill their civic obligations, why not start from the premise that there are many ways citizens can and do participate in the democratic life of a nation? We are a very pluralistic society, after all, and few would disagree that different types of participation may be more appropriate for and/or accessible to different individuals and groups, for different purposes, and at different times in the life of a person or a nation. From this perspective, the trend in declining turnout among the young (2004 aside) can be interpreted as not a rejection of public life but a shift in the types of participation in which these citizens are engaging.

An alternative view is that certain kinds of engagement are individually or collectively superior to others. For example, many theorists and practitioners see campaigns and elections as the *sine qua non* of a representative democracy, providing accountability while also assuring stability. Others are as or more vehement in their disdain for privileging this kind of “thin democracy,” arguing for the superiority of more local and direct forms of democratic involvement.

In this book we try to walk a middle ground between these two views. We acknowledge the necessity and value of diverse participation, while remaining cognizant that civic engagement can not substitute for political engagement or vice versa. The “gold standard” for a democratic polity would be equitable and substantial participation in both the civic

and political spheres, and the “gold standard” for a democratic citizen would be someone who is facile in both types of engagement.

## **Generational Replacement and the Changing Nature of Citizen Engagement**

Given the emphasis we place on the implications of longer term trends in the mix of civic and political engagement for the health of American democracy, the impact of generational replacement is of particular relevance. We have already noted the generation gap in voter turnout over the past 30-plus years. There is additional, if mixed and debated, evidence that the growing generational divide in the public’s psychological and behavioral engagement in public life goes far beyond voting (National Commission on Civic Renewal 1998; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). This includes, among other things, electoral activity such as working for parties and candidates, choosing public service careers, and following public affairs in the news. And it extends to certain kinds of engagement in civil society, such as organizational membership, social interactions with friends and neighbors, and trust in fellow citizens (National Commission on Civic Renewal 1998; Putnam 2000; Rahn 1998; Skocpol 2003). Political scientist Robert Putnam has decried this apparent erosion of the public sphere, carefully documenting a 30-year trend in declining political and civic engagement and the impact of this decline on the quality of our individual and collective personal and public lives (Putnam 2000).

While numerous “suspects” have been identified as the potential source of this political and civic decay—for example, changes in family structure, the decline of political parties, the increased pressures of limited time, the need/desire for money, suburbanization, immigration, politicians’ scandalous behaviors, television and other electronic media—according to Putnam the most important cause has been the replacement of older, more engaged cohorts with younger, less engaged ones, accounting for fully half of the downward spiral in engagement. But identifying generational replacement as a cause begs the question of why the younger cohort arrives with a diminished commitment to participation. Generational replacement is one of the most fundamental issues any polity faces, since over time it literally involves the placing of its future into the hands of an entirely new and untested public. At the heart of