

Public Abstract

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A preponderance of research in political communication has centered on the lack of voter mobilization and indicates that the youth of the nation do not participate in the democratic process. In 2000, national research teams collected data about this problem and the results indicated that there is a generational difference in how citizens define their roles in civic engagement. In an effort to explore those differences, this study seeks to answer questions about how citizens talk about their involvement or lack of involvement.

By engaging small groups of citizens that represent different generations, and analyzing their political talk, it is clear that the problem with civic engagement is not only that citizens are not voting, but that citizens view themselves as political participants in different ways that traditional measures suggest.

This study is based on a social constructionist perspective and utilizes Post-Modernization and Generational Replacement Theory to further understand the political talk of citizens. The results indicate that new definitions of civic engagement and political involvement are necessary to truly understand why democracy seems to be changing and what pro-involvement researchers and movements can do to ensure the health of our democracy.

Dewey argued that communication builds communities which build democracy. If this is true, then the involvement of the polity seems particularly imperative to the survival of democracy. With the lack of engagement among younger citizens, the fate of democracy may be at risk. The analysis of the focus group discussions suggests that the process of post-modernization through generational replacement is occurring and that the values of younger generations deserve further review. In the final analysis, a new model of civic involvement--the Generational Identity Continuum--is proposed as a possible explanation for how citizens identify themselves as part of or outside of the political system. This new model of civic involvement may lead to new perspectives on traditional concepts of political involvement and introduce new questions about how politics work, why the youth are less involved, and how theorists test the health of democracy.