

GENERATIONAL SHIFTS AND THE CREATION OF POLITICAL SELVES:  
A FOCUS GROUP INVESTIGATION

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This work is dedicated to my father, Albert J. Dudash, Jr. who never saw it come to fruition but always knew it would and taught me not to quit. Thanks, Dad.

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## ABSTRACT

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 talking with small groups of citizens that represented different generations, 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.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Overview

“Voting is for old people.” This is the sentiment expressed in a popular tee shirt created and marketed by Urban Outfitters, a company popular with young citizens. The statement implies that voting is outdated or is not for young people or at the very least is something only older people do. In any interpretation, the resounding meaning behind this statement seems to be that younger people simply do not vote or do not feel the need to vote. While this attitude is not new, it has never been made a public marketing tool until recently. Groups such as Rock the Vote, UVOTE2004 and other voter awareness campaigns have fought this attitude for decades. While public backlash resulted in removal of this particular shirt from Urban Outfitters markets, perhaps the sentiment it expressed deserves further evaluation. Is voting really for old people or an outdated concept to the youth? More importantly, what does this attitude mean for a representative democracy where communication between the electorate and the government is vital?

Democracy is defined by many communication acts: the campaigning process requires the candidates to persuade the general public; an election process allows voters to express their opinion by voting; and the act of being a citizen of a democratic community requires communication between individuals (Dewey, 1927). The quality and success of these communication acts indicate not only whom the electorate chooses

as their leaders, but also the overall state of the union. Voter participation has been used as a general indicator of the polity's engagement, level of discontent, and even as an indicator of the health of the democracy (see Doppelt & Shearer, 1999; Ginsberg & Stone, 1996; Shudson, 1998). The vote, at least in theory, is important to understanding the health of the nation as a democratic society. These acts of communication between the electorate and their leaders carry with them a great deal of responsibility.

This is not to suggest that rates of voter participation are the *only* or even the *best* indicators of democratic health. As will be addressed later, some argue that voter turnout is not nearly as important as other forms of civic engagement. Measures of civic engagement and participation have included many indicators: social and community activities, decision-making, civic activism, and political interest. We might begin to envision these activities on a continuum from passive to more active or argue that new and additional activities should be included among civic indicators. One might assume that civic activism is worthwhile even if it does not affect election outcomes through the act of voting. In other words, there is some indication that using voter turnout numbers as an indication of democratic health is inadequate and thus civic participation needs to be more thoroughly examined.

Despite this argument, voter turnout is still the indicator political participation researchers utilize most frequently. This is due, in part, to the fact that there is a single measure or number that can be used as an indicator of trends in electoral engagement. It is simple, easy to work with, and deemed important in the process of gauging the civic involvement of the electorate. Though other modes of evaluating participation are

available, they are difficult to measure and thus unappealing when voter turnout numbers are more readily available.

One trend of great interest in this area is the decrease in voter turnout (and heretofore assumed civic engagement) particularly across different age brackets and cohorts. The “generation gap” has been used to serve as an explanation for myriad social phenomena, including what is perceived as a decline in civic involvement. Accusing younger generations of lack of interest in their political environment or suggestions that they may simply be lazy is one way in which this decline is explained. However, the “gap” is a flawed metaphor for this kind of social change and it does not take into consideration nuances of what Inglehart (1997) terms “generational replacement.” Popkin (1999) argues that some non-voters are actually quite rational in their decision not to participate in the electoral process and they make that choice in a reasoned manner. Much the same, younger citizens may choose to involve—or not involve— themselves in the political process in different ways than traditionally expected. Additionally, the shift in civic activities between generations does not occur at a fixed point; rather it is a trend that has continued in a downward direction across all generations for several decades.

There are two main lines of thought on generational differences in political engagement research. The “generation gap” metaphor and the “generational replacement” view define ways in which generational change might be perceived and examined. Using the “gap” metaphor, generations are defined with clear beginning and ending periods. Dates, years, or age limits have been used to illustrate beginning and ending generational groups. Consider, for example, the difference between “Generation X” and the “Baby boomer generation.” These generations are defined by when an individual was born.

Individuals who were born in the forties and fifties are considered baby boomers, while those born in the seventies or eighties are considered generation X. These strict limits placed on generations allows for a metaphor of a “gap” between them, or a distinct difference between the groups born in those years. The values of the different generations are a part of those fixed time periods, assuming that the members of distinct generations have been similarly shaped by a general sense of shared values (Klecka, 2001). Additionally, the life cycle process defines most differences between generations—as we get older, for example, we change or modify our behavior towards being more politically active in a similar manner (Klecka, 2001). Generational replacement, on the other hand, does not assume two differing generations at fixed points in time. Instead, it examines social change as generations are replaced and renewed over time. As older citizens die and younger citizens move through life-cycle stages, they gain a certain momentum and the values that different generations carry with them also move through the replacement process. Therefore, as citizens move through the replacement process, their values shift with them making certain values more prominent at different times than others. Inglehart (1997) explains:

The evidence accumulated so far indicates that pervasive changes are taking place in basic values of the publics of industrialized and industrializing societies throughout the world. Moreover, these changes seem to be linked with intergenerational population replacement processes, which means that they are gradual, but have a good deal of momentum. (p. 5)

For example, he argues as democracies move through stages of modernization from industrialization, different value systems arise. In the case of the current trends, the U.S.

is in a stage of post-modernization, where there is an increased interest in individualism. This new individualism leads to a stronger attachment to individual rights, less focus on the community, and therefore a decrease in what has heretofore been defined as civic engagement.

Inglehart (1997) has also studied developing democracies across the globe. By comparison, democracies in different stages showed varying degrees of civic participation. Newer democracies have a large percentage of their population voting and actively engaging the process, whereas democracies in later stages, such as the U.S., have lower rates of participation shown through several measures. Democracy in each stage is defined by the economic development of the country as well. Therefore, Inglehart's explanations are helpful in understanding how a late-stage democracy might change its level of democratic process involvement. Studies of civic activity in the U.S., however, generally do not take into consideration this "democratic development" perspective and therefore usually study the process in pieces: examining voter turnout rates, gauging the knowledge levels of the polity, or by examining key political messages and pointing to them as possible explanations of civic apathy. When studying generational differences in political involvement the focus is still on the different segments of the voting public; and by not adopting the democratic development perspective, this literature tends to ignore generational value shifts as possible explanations for decreases in voter rates.

A vast amount of voter turnout and civic engagement literature (e.g., Keiser, 2000; Ladd, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Shudson, 1998; Van Benschoten, 2000) has addressed the issue of decreasing numbers of voters over time. However, this literature has some gaps in it and further exploration is needed.

Specifically, Putnam (2000) argues that an increase in individual values with less focus on one's community has led to a decline in participation in most social activities, including voting. Some have argued against Putnam's thesis, suggesting that his measures of civic involvement are out of date or incomplete (Bennett, 1998); but his work is frequently cited and overall his thesis of the decline in social capital is well accepted. One such disagreement is proposed by Inglehart (1997) who argues that a shift in values is not about less or more community involvement, but more about what members of a community deem to be important as political activity. For example, in a society that has entered a period of "postmodernization" (Inglehart, 1997), interest in individual rights and freedoms is more prevalent than involvement in public policy decision-making.

While in Putnam's (2000) view we are moving away from *each other* towards individuation, in Inglehart's (1997) view we are moving from one set of values to another. Putnam (2000) and Bennett (1990b) argue that there are value shifts in generational cohorts while Inglehart (1997) and Shudson (1998) argue that citizens' focus has shifted to individual rights and privileges. In both views, the result is a decrease in voter turnout and civic activity, but for different reasons. Shudson refers to this as a trend towards the "private citizen" while Inglehart refers to this as a shift towards "postmodernization," with both emphasizing different views of engagement. On the contrary, Putnam and Bennett suggest that younger generations simply are not as civically active.

What becomes important to understanding participation and generational differences is how individuals react as a group towards these value changes. While



Putnam documents less civic activity, Inglehart and Bennett leave open the possibility that civic participation is taking place in different ways, rather than just in voter turnout or other traditional measurements of civic activity. As an example of this, Putnam utilizes twelve measurements of participation and activity which are from 20-year trend data collected from 1974 until 1994, namely, serving as an officer in a club or organization, working for a political candidate or party, serving on a committee for local organizations, attending public meetings on local affairs, attending political rallies or speeches, making speeches, writing congressmen and senators, signing a petition, being a member of a politically active group, running or holding political office, writing a letter to the newspaper, and writing an article for a newspaper or magazine. On all measures, there has been a significant decline in citizen participation over the past two decades. While these activities are, in one way or another, communication activities, they are also traditional modes of what has been called civic or public participation.

What Putnam's study does *not* address are activities such as protesting, school activities, global actions or concerns or alternative types of volunteerism. His measures do not encompass communication activities at the individual level such as how individuals might communicate with their peers about the political process, what they think their role is in the communication process, or how they evaluate themselves and others as part of the process. Furthermore, these studies do not take into consideration a process of socialization. For example, Chaffee and McDevitt (2002) suggest that students who are encouraged to take a more active role in civic activities, can, in fact, effect greater participation in their parents and households. This type of study suggests that traditional measures of civic engagement may not encompass activities engaged in

by those too young to vote or the impact they may have on older generations, and thus further suggests that different modes of involvement at all ages are worth exploring.

Additionally, as Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) suggest, individuals may be more likely to participate in programs at a neighborhood level, volunteer in local social movements, meet at different types of meetings and engage in different charitable events. Here, too, these activities are not represented by such measures that Putnam uses to support his thesis of the decay of community. Bennett (1998) also suggests that civic culture is changing, “civic culture is not dead; it has merely taken on new identities and can be found living in other communities” (p. 42). It is these new identities and communities that have yet to be explored and should be more thoroughly investigated. New questions should focus not on whether or not people are engaged in voting, but *how* they think they are engaged in what they deem to be civic matters.

#### *Focus of Current Study*

Therefore, this study focuses on civic engagement as a communication act and, more specifically, how individuals talk about this act. Understanding “talk” about the political process and about engaging that process is important for understanding the social institution of democracy. For example, the presidential inaugural address and campaign rhetoric are examples of how a social institution (the government) is maintained through language. The presidential inaugural is an enactment of the office and therefore a part of the institution—the act of giving the speech is an act of the institution and thus, legitimization of the institution. The first amendment and sexual harassment laws are language about language. Laws are communication acts in and of themselves, which guide or regulate social speech acts. These laws are used to enforce

and maintain the institution of the court system; law is the communication of our courts. In short, language creates the meaning that, in turn, builds and maintains our social institutions. How individuals see themselves in terms of the political process depends on how they construct themselves in that process through their language. Schwandt (2000) explains that socially constructing ourselves is an ever-present and on-going process, “[Social] constructivism means that human meanings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in light of new experiences” (p. 197). On the larger societal level, the political process is defined by laws, regulations, electoral processes, and social institutions. On the individual level, people construct their role in the political process through their own experience and perspectives.

*Current Approaches to the Study of Political Engagement*

Skocpol and Fiorina (1999) suggest that there are three different approaches to the study of civic engagement: the social capital perspective, the rational choice perspective, and the historical-institutionalism perspective. Political scientists tend to work from the social capital perspective (see Putnam, 2000). Sociologists focus on work related to the rational choice perspective (see Doppelt & Shearer, 1999; Popkin, 1999). The historical-institutional perspective is maintained through historians and specifically related to democratic theory (e.g., Batestone & Mendiera’s edited volume, 1999).

McKinney, Kaid, and Bystrom (2005) have advanced the communicative engagement perspective as a fourth approach to the study of civic engagement. Their approach focuses on the political message, interactions, and meanings that guide citizens’

behavior and attitudes toward the political process. While the existing three perspectives are helpful in understanding civic engagement, they tend to focus on narrow indicators or factors of political *behavior* (namely, voting). The communicative engagement perspective provides for analysis of the talk and citizen interactions surrounding their political involvement. It is within this perspective that the present study is grounded and seeks to add to the current literature on civic engagement. The following chapters attempt to address many concerns described above from a communicative engagement perspective. Communicative engagement differs from other terms such as civic engagement, political engagement, activism, political involvement, and the dialogue between citizens and government. Instead of focusing on voter behavior, traditional measures of political involvement, or political knowledge, this term encompasses other engagement practices specifically focused on how individuals involve themselves in the political process through communication practices. Such practices serve as the foundation for citizens' political understanding, their construction of political reality, and the very foundation of democracy.

#### *Key Terms*

The idea of communicative engagement is based upon a combination and recalibration of more commonly used terminology. The *political process* is the large-scale or macro-term for democratic practices. *Activism* is specifically geared towards those who seek out political agendas or activities to further political goals. *Engagement* is based on the voters' involvement in the political process, expressing opinions, voice, knowledge of and activity within the process. *Participation* is a smaller part of the engagement picture and describes the active role played by citizens as defined by

traditional modes of voting, volunteering in campaigns, actively learning about political candidates and issues, and engaging in local political practices. The *electoral process* is a micro-level term to describe the specific campaigning, voting, and activity surrounding local, state and national activities of candidates. In short, communicative engagement is a lens for viewing the political process as a continuous dialogue, discussion, or communication act and guides this particular study.

### *Justification*

Political scientist Doris Graber notes, “It is important to examine the mind-set of the nation’s young adults to assess how safe the heritage of democracy is likely to be in their care” (2001, p. 433). A study of generational differences and attitudes towards civic engagement is a much-needed contribution for understanding democracy. Generations of voters have been studied, voting behavior is frequently studied, and sometimes both are linked when studied. However, existing studies are not unified in method or conclusions, and they are limited in the field of communication particularly. The study presented in the following chapters is important for several reasons. First, the concept of the generation gap needs to be reconstructed in terms of political value change. Second, the communicative engagement of different generations of citizens warrants investigation. Finally, a close analysis of political talk, and construction of the political self as part of the political process, is necessary for further understanding of how democracy may continue to function.

Generational replacement and the generation gap are two different concepts that have not been adequately addressed in terms of political participation. Inglehart’s (1997) studies are focused on developing democracies as they compare to established

democracies. The trends he addresses have less to do with a difference in generational perceptions and more to do with generational replacement. Younger generations may still be civically engaged, but do not vote because the issues they are presented with are not important to them as voting issues. As the younger generations begin to grow older it is possible that very few will be pick up the habit of voting and being “politically active.” It is unlikely that their behavior will change (Putnam, 2000). However, we may not yet fear that we are headed towards oligarchy, despite Hart’s (2002) assertions that if voting trends continue in the next few decades, a very few will be voting for and ruling the many in future years. It may be true that generations maintain their level of engagement throughout their lifespans and therefore low levels of engagement in younger generations lead to fears of low levels of engagement as these generations become older. However, their engagement levels are based on different value systems that are also maintained within the generation. Therefore, generations may replace themselves, but the more important political engagement factor is that the values they carry with them replace old value systems, and therefore change the political value landscape. It is therefore important to periodically revisit the landscape and see how it has changed—and now is one of those times.

The electoral process—or ballot box—is the most common link between citizens and their government. The vote as a mass communication act is interesting, but discussions surrounding voting decisions provides a more in-depth understanding of voter attitudes and behaviors. Non-voters are completely ignored and not given a voice if only votes cast by voters are analyzed. This results in two undesirable situations: 1) non-voters (whose numbers surpass voters in most recent elections) are not addressed as a part

of the larger civic culture, and 2) civic engagement represented by indicators other than vote tallies are ignored. By drawing on communication theory and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, the question of civic engagement can become less about voter turnout and more focused on citizen attitudes and civic involvement.

Finally, those with some expertise in how language works and how meaning is created should engage this type of research. We must study the talk of citizens if we adopt the communicative engagement perspective. This approach is particularly important because personal conversation and political talk are important indicators of issue and campaign knowledge (Pfau & Eveland, 1996). These studies have shown that political talk and personal interaction between citizens leads to increased amounts of knowledge about the political process. Additionally, study of political talk and research should focus on *how* citizens talk about civic involvement rather than simply addressing civic engagement as a binary construct of voting and non-voting. Finally, analysis of political talk allows for a specific focus on the quality of the discourse citizens use.

An approach to analysis must also be found that addresses civic engagement more broadly and not simply as voter behavior. Research needs to refocus analysis on how individuals construct themselves as part of the communicatively (dis)engaged, instead of only relying on past behavior patterns as a way to explain current voter turnout and participation. Communication scholars are specifically equipped to do such analysis by first asking citizens about their experiences, by carefully analyzing their responses, and finally placing conclusions drawn from these experiences into the larger scope of what has already been learned about citizen participation in the political process. The type of study presented here can bridge some of the gaps in the existing literature about civic

engagement and answer questions about *why* people participate or not, rather than just *who* is and is not participating. Such investigation extends the literature from Popkin (1994) and Doppelt and Shearer (1999).

Several broad research questions guide the current analysis in the following chapters. Are there qualitative differences in how older and younger generations communicate about their civic engagement? How do they talk about their role in the political process and what themes can be found between generations? What might the way citizens use language about political involvement say about the maintenance of social institutions? Will conclusions drawn from this type of analysis undermine previous conclusions about voter behavior and civic engagement?

This type of study is needed and is socially responsible. As more claims are made about participation in the political process, it seems necessary that voters and non-voters alike be represented in research. Analysis of citizens' views gives that opportunity to participants, but also gives researchers a more detailed picture of what the perspectives are of the polity. This type of study might also open more doors for future research directions. It seems important and necessary to give citizens the opportunity to explain their attitudes and behaviors, and hopefully from these findings more survey research and social scientific approaches can use this information to better inform research.

In sum, voting behavior has too often been used as an indicator of civic engagement. Recent studies are finding that engagement may be occurring in different ways such as volunteering, protesting, being environmentally active, attending church functions, or talking about political issues (*Change*, 2000; Keiser, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). These different forms of civic



engagement require further exploration and particularly the analysis of talk surrounding the political process. As specialists in understanding how meaning is created and shared, communication scholars have a responsibility to aid in our understanding of democracy and its communicative underpinnings. The vote and discussions surrounding it (as well as all civic involvement) are communication acts that support and maintain the social institutions of politics and government. Much like the Urban Outfitters tee shirt, political messages are not always sent in traditional modes of communication. Citizens grant their government the power to act by legitimizing it through their own discourse and communicative acts. In other words, a communication act is at the very core of maintaining legitimate representative democracies, and it only makes sense that a communicative engagement perspective is the appropriate approach for understanding democracy.

The following chapter is an examination of the literature addressing issues surrounding voter turnout and civic engagement. Chapter Three is an explanation of the method used for this particular study. Chapter Four is a presentation of the data and analysis. Finally, Chapter Five includes a discussion of the findings, recognition of the limitations of the study, and concludes with suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

This review is a comprehensive look at the literature mainly focused on civic participation and the possible impacts of generational differences between those who are civically active and those who refrain from being involved. The literature on these subjects is found in sociology, psychology, political science, communication, and philosophy. I attempt to pull together from these different fields of study the overall discussions and debates relating to civic engagement. Six main areas of literature will be addressed, including: a definition of civic engagement and the different conceptualizations of the concept; the debate surrounding the importance of civic engagement in democratic theory; the controversy of voter turnout and participation; the types of civic apathy outlined in the literature; a discussion about media and technology as a solution for civic apathy; and a discussion about the impact of generational differences in civic activity. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the literature that focuses on how individuals talk about their activity in the political system.

#### *Defining Civic Engagement*

In the elections of 1996 and 2000, there was a substantial decline in the percentage of younger voters. In 1998, fewer than 20% of 18-25 year olds voted; but according to Ven Benschoten (2000), younger citizens are more civically active than

those numbers might indicate. In fact, this is a common sentiment about the younger generation—they are active, they just do not vote. What, then, do we mean by civic engagement? Joel Spoonheim, director of the Active Citizens School explains: “Civic engagement is about voting and volunteering, but also about building and creating strong communities” (Van Benschoten, 2000, p. 305). The way in which most have considered civic engagement is flawed, Spoonheim explains further:

In a consumerist nation, the ability of citizens to produce solutions to shared problems is weakened from lack of practice. Civic engagement is about helping citizens recognize their authority, learn the skills to create change, and organize a base with others who share a common vision. (p. 305)

Others have conceptualized civic engagement as volunteering. Ladd (1999) argues that younger individuals are civically engaged but they are joining different groups rather than more traditional ones, and therefore are left out of the current conceptualizations, and therefore measurements, of civic engagement. Ladd further argues that not only are individuals, including young citizens, joining groups but they are volunteering, and they are more charitable than before and they are involved in local activities such as working at hospitals or donating time to local causes. Keiser (2000) takes a similar approach to civic engagement and explains that the “new politics” of the youth in particular involves volunteering (of which some 60% are involved in), and they simply need a new agenda to motivate them to participate in government (p. 3). *Change* (2000) argues that college students are volunteering and are engaged by volunteering as voting is more difficult for them due to their transient residential status. In addition, Greenberg (2000) argues that churches are part of civic engagement and can be used

towards political ends. Participation in church activities may include becoming involved in political issues (e.g. right to life movements, AIDS movements, helping the homeless and charitable events). While volunteerism and church work may not be a substitute for voting, they are a type of civic engagement that may have political ends, even if the means are not inherently political.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) state:

Political voluntary activism can, in turn, take many forms. The vote has, understandably, assumed primacy in studies of citizen participation in politics, with the result that, thanks to voting statistics and election surveys, it is the mode of participation about which we have the most information. (p. 9)

This summation concisely illustrates the point that voting is what we know the most about; but it should not be presumed to be the only measure of an active citizenry.

Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) further suggest that political voluntary activity should include more than voting and should include any activity that is political in nature and voluntary on the part of the citizen. “Political” means that the action “has the intent or effect of influencing government action” (p. 38). Voluntary means that the action is “not obligatory” (p. 39). Citizen “activity” includes not only being attentive to political goings-on, but being involved in influencing the government and affecting change.

Volunteering alone should not be mistaken for political engagement, any more than the voting rates should be considered the sole measure of political engagement.

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) suggest that electoral participation increases when the government reaches crucial decisions, or when issues become more salient. Yet, as previously mentioned, exactly how engagement is measured is hotly debated.

While we may assume civic involvement is a choice, the ability to influence the government and be active in activities that focus on influence as a goal can be problematic for certain individuals in American culture. The divide between the economic classes can dictate the amount of free time available to those who might otherwise choose to participate in civic affairs. For example, it is generally those who are more affluent who can afford to spend time voluntarily participating in different groups. The demands of civic engagement, therefore, places limits on who may or may not become engaged, based on their social and economic class. As is described later, this fact becomes problematic for democratic equality. Ultimately, Verba, Shlozman, and Brady (1995) found that people generally are concerned about the common good, but when it comes to civic participation, the “voices will always be unequal” (p. 39) based on money and class.

Not everyone agrees, however, that voter turnout is a problematic gauge of civic activity. Schudson (1998) suggests that the vote remains a familiar and important measure of civic engagement:

The most familiar measure has been voter turnout—the percentage of citizens eligible to vote that do so has declined in the past generation. This is a relevant measure, indeed, in part because voting is an act not only of citizen participation, but also of general faith in the political system. (p. 301)

One concern that will be addressed later in this study is whether faith in the political system is higher among those who vote than those who do not vote. Another concern to be considered later is the reliance on the vote as a *measure of democratic health*.

Civic engagement is, clearly, a loaded term. Volunteerism, voting, social capital, cultural values, and activism in grassroots movements are all a part of different conceptualizations of civic engagement. For the purposes of this work, civic engagement includes all of these activities. As the literature suggests, and the following chapters indicate, civic engagement is defined by the people who are involved in participating in democracy—however they define this concept for themselves. As suggested in the previous chapter, civic engagement can also be redefined from a communicative engagement perspective (McKinney, et. al., 2005). How individuals define the act of being civically active is an important part of understanding why civic engagement *appears* to be on the decline. Political talk—be it behind closed doors at the family dinner table or publicly in a town hall meeting—is the embodiment of the communication between citizens which leads to community activity and therefore a healthy democracy. It is these face-to-face interactions that warrant further study in order to understand the link between engagement and participation.

### *Civic Engagement and Democratic Theory*

If defining civic engagement as a term is difficult, then understanding the impact of engagement—or lack thereof—on democracy is even more complex. The debate surrounding participation and democracy is based on different ideas of democratic governance. For the most part, however, engagement and its impact are dependent on the role of the citizen. How citizenship is defined influences how civic engagement is viewed in terms of democracy. From its most basic tenets, through its actual practice in the present day, democracy and its health is dependent on the role of the citizen and the polity's role in governmental practice. Schwartz (2001) explains that civic engagement is

about building communities. Those communities function as the cornerstone to democracy and therefore participation is a key element. Individuals who are part of these communities are ultimately the guardians of democracy.

Dewey (1927) likewise argued that at the root of democracy is community and at the root of community is communication. That is to say, communities are built on the communication practices of its participants. If this is true, then the base of democracy is dependent upon the ability of individuals to become a part of the larger community and uphold its social institutions; or individuals must become a part of the conversation and join the community through political conversation – otherwise the state of a successful democracy may be in jeopardy. However, individuals must feel that they have efficacy and that they can participate equally in the on-going civic conversation if this theory is workable in practice. In short, citizens should be able to communicate equally and freely with each other in order to maintain their communities and become a part of the larger social fabric. There are often times when voices are not heard, people are left out of community involvement, and consequently, out of participation in democracy. Civic involvement may be hindered by social class, economic status, political knowledge, time and opportunity to join in. As stated previously, low economic status can be particularly detrimental to increased participation. This is reminiscent of the historical period in the U.S. where race and politics were volatile: African Americans in the 1960s had to be legislated into the voting system much like women were in 1921. However, legislation as a solution to lower class discrimination in terms of voting participation is nearly impossible and such remedies would be against the nature of “voluntary” involvement.

Indeed, “fixing” the class divide will not increase civic participation. Legislation does not fix citizens’ inability to spend time in civic activity.

Those who argue that there is a need for more participation point to inequality and a lack of representation for certain groups in the current system. Lijphart (1997) argues that we need more voting participation for three main reasons: first, there is a current bias against lower classes; second, inequality exists in “political influence;” and third, turnout is on the decline across all types of voters and must be reversed (p. 1). Schwartz (2001) argues that while civic engagement is still about building community, these communities cannot be viewed the same way as Dewey’s conceptualization. Historically, communities have changed greatly. Smaller communities, more involvement in local issues, and a “town hall” atmosphere for participation are no longer a part of the much larger communities that constitute modern society. In fact, Schwartz further argues that direct representation was never really possible—and certainly not now—and that the “fraternal order” does not exist anymore (as it once did in the time of our founding fathers) (p. 273). However, the level of engagement at that time was not ideal either. While there may have been more “eligible” community members at earlier town hall meetings, such meetings did not include women or other minorities.

Direct participation in government by as mass public is not possible. Nonetheless, self-governance has always been regarded a cornerstone of democracy and citizen participation is key for that self-governance. Bennett and Resnick (1990) argue that decreases in voting participation does not threaten democracy, but it does skew the political agenda in favor of those who do participate. Voting also performs another function in that it helps the elites pay attention to public opinion and this public



monitoring function is a useful purpose for the vote to serve (Bennett & Resnick, 1990).

While the vote is only one communication act available to the masses—does it help build community? If so, then we need to do more to get citizens involved in voting. If voting is not necessarily tied to strengthening community, then we need to learn the other ways communities may be built.

As noted, direct democracy is not a viable option in modern society. The idea of all citizens having a direct say in every aspect of government produces perhaps even more negative effects than less self-selective participation by the polity. Kesler (2002) explains that in direct democracy people lose respect for the process and find the constant decision-making that direct democracy requires to be mundane. He states, “That experiments in direct democracy at the state level have proved more or less tolerable, and even useful, should not lead us to undervalue what the Founders bequeathed to us: the constitutional framework that keeps the costs of such experiments low” (p. 18). Lichterman (1996) suggests that individualism actually serves the greater good in a similar trickle-down effect. As individuals focus on their rights, concerns of the individual, and protection of the individual, the larger community is thus preserved. Batstone (1999) suggests that community is not the mothership of democracy. Simply arguing for more community is not particularly helpful, especially as the community seems to be redefined. Instead, Batstone (1999) also suggests individuals should focus on the process of achieving a democracy and “declare a war on ignorance” (p. 39) as government and institutional solutions to current problems with democracy will not solve the problems of a perceived lack of community.

While some argue that we need less direct democracy and less focus on community and participation, Joseph (1981) explains that we need more direct democracy and more participation—otherwise democracy could be overrun as described below. As technology develops and interest in political participation increases, the need for more direct democracy could become prevalent (Abrams, 2002). However, the United States has never seen a purely direct democracy, and whether or not it is viable—even through technology—is questionable. Still, the debate over whether more participation is necessary or not is important as it is key to Dewey’s idea of community and communication as the bases for a participatory democracy.

Some have argued that the Internet is a possible solution for a lack of turnout at the polls; however, existing Internet studies have focused on individual involvement NOT defined by the vote. While studies that veer away from a focus on the vote are becoming more popular and should be applauded, they also do not provide evidence for increased voter turnout and instead rely on speculation. Such studies indicate that blogging is useful in encouraging political involvement (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005) and this Internet activity also encourages political talk (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004).

Furthermore, current technological solutions to the problem of voter turnout (such as voting online, registering on-line, and online communities) may not work, or worse, cause further problems such as individualism and alienation. According to Gilmour and Lamb (1975), alienation has taken different forms over time, and political alienation has affected groups differently. It is currently unclear how alienation might occur with technological advances in efforts to increase voting. Skocpol (2003) argues, “the history of American civic life tells us that such currently fashionable remedies risk worsening the

diseases they wish to cure” (p. 255). In fact, as Skocpol suggests, that current remedies for lack of participation will not work: “recommendations so preoccupied with local social life—remedies that ignore issues of economic inequality, power disparity, and political demobilization—are simply not plausible” (Skocpol, 2003, p. 257). Finding a technological “quick fix” to the problem of political participation can entrench already established symptoms of a diminishing community.

The focus on inequality and the ability of people to participate is reflected in the role of the citizen in democratic practices. Perry and Katula (2001) argue that service and citizenship are linked, but each is not necessary for the other. One might participate in the voting system, but not serve the community while others might serve their community but not necessarily vote. In other words, to be a citizen does not mean one has to be an active participant in traditional ways. People can participate through all means of service and non voting is not a definition of an alienated public or citizenry. Indeed, service to one’s community builds a strong community as much, or more so, than voting.

West (1999) argues that in order to really participate in being a citizen, one must engage in a struggle, find an issue, become involved and, as suggested in the previous section, perhaps influence the government in some way. Bennett (1998) argues that individuals can be and are engaged privately, even as the public sphere erodes. West’s views focus on impact while Bennett focuses on individualism. Perhaps Hale (2001) points to the right question about citizenship when he explains that historically it is questionable how a citizen has been defined. He argues that a citizen has been defined by such dimensions as equality, rights, participatory democracy, and perhaps inclusion in the system. Nonetheless, as he explains, citizenship and participation take hard work, hard

work that individuals might be contributing for their own good, rather than for the benefit of the greater community. This notion supports the arguments that individualism may be on the rise because participating in the community solely for the sake of others may be unrealistic. As Fishkin (1995) also suggests, it is hard to be engaged on a large scale and easier to be engaged on a small scale. For example, becoming a part of a local group in a Neighborhood Watch is easier and more useful to one's own private life than becoming part of a national grassroots movement to affect social change. In short, increased individualism may not always have a negative impact on citizen participation.

The role of the citizen, the need for participation, the role of individualism and communitarianism have all proven to be problematic in determining whether greater civic participation should be encouraged or left alone. Fishkin (1995) relays a quotation from noted political scientist V.O. Key, "The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input...the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from the alternatives and outlooks presented them" (p. 16). If the voice of the people is a reflection of those already in power, selected by citizens who want to have a voice, then perhaps there is no need to become excited about declining participation in democracy. In fact, Fishkin (1995) argues further that our current system is based on a common fallacy, classic synecdoche, "It is a form of representation that occurs regularly in politics, which is, after all, a process of allowing a part to stand for, or re-present, the whole" (p. 3). Citizenship, it would seem, is based on the flawed assumption that individuals may be represented on the whole by the few. But citizenship has always been questioned, and tested. Schudson

(1998, p. 294) states, “Citizenship in the United States has not disappeared. It has not even declined. It has, inevitably, changed.”

Perhaps there is some hope for both sides of this debate, but especially for those concerned with inequality in citizen participation. As Schudson (1998) concludes:

Progress or decline is not the real question. All that is required to criticize the present state of affairs is to know that some serious injustices persist, that some remediable conditions that limit human possibility lie before us, and that resources for reconstituting ourselves can be found. (p. 313)

Of course, the ultimate question in all of these works is about government legitimacy. Is a democracy legitimate if there is not citizen participation, or not enough citizen participation? More to the point, is there a *right* level of participation for a healthy democracy? While the current study does not seek to answer these questions, it is important to remember that conclusions about the health of a democracy are generally drawn from conceptualizations of civic participation and engagement. A change in the conceptualization of participation might lead to further questions about the way a healthy democracy is defined.

#### *Voter Turnout and Participation*

No matter how the theoretical debate regarding democracy is viewed, current themes in research suggest that voter turnout should be increased and that citizen participation is important. Here, most of the arguments are familiar. Specifically, the way to remedy certain injustice in the classes or the masses is through democratic participation. Increasing that participation requires sending a signal to the elites through the communication available to all citizens: their vote. But another debate continues: Has

the voting population really declined or are we simply more aware of it? If it has declined, is it really the younger voters who are disengaged? Are they disengaged simply because they do not vote? Jackman (1987) suggests that predictors of voter participation—such as increased education and economic conditions—work in most industrialized societies; but because the U.S. is less of a participatory culture than other cultures, rarely are these predictors helpful. Instead, the less participatory, more individualized culture of the United States moots or at least complicates the issue of electoral participation. The debate on participation in America, then, focuses on four main arguments: 1) That voter turnout is not declining; 2) That turnout is declining; 3) That if there is a decline, it is not a bad thing; and 4) That the decline is bad for democracy.

The first major line of argument is that there is a decline in voting in the first place. Howe and Strauss (2001) argue that there is a decline in the youth vote as well. McDonald and Popkin (2001), however, explain that many voting studies are flawed, and that while voter turnout has declined over the past several decades, it may not be as substantial as some have argued. McDonald and Popkin (2001) cite different problems with voting analyses, specifically the populations chosen for analysis. Specifically, they note that voting populations may be constructed in multiple ways and the most accurate counts should not include such individuals as illegal aliens, prison populations, those who have ever been convicted of a felon and thus no longer eligible to vote, and overseas citizens. While many of these citizens and populations (most of whom are US citizens) are actually included in such counts as census numbers, McDonald and Popkin argue that including these individuals among the voting population artificially inflates the

percentage of non-voters. For further explanation of the various ways to estimate voter participation rates, see McKinney, et. al (2005).

Analyses of voter turnout have also not focused on the youth vote alone. Older generations are still voting regularly, despite their decreased turnout in local elections when compared to their participation in national elections. Furthermore, Federal Election Commission surveys indicate that voting participation *has* declined over time, among *every* generation (see [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)).

The next line of argument, naturally, is whether this decline is particularly problematic for our democracy. Some ideas about democracy (as indicated in the previous section) are based on the assumption that the government needs citizen participation—and some argue full citizen participation— in order for self-governance to be legitimate. Additionally, Hart claims (2003) that the dangers of voter decline could plunge our democracy into oligarchy. While this may be somewhat of an exaggeration, the sentiment that the decline in voting is detrimental is somewhat widespread among scholars. Goldstein and Morin (2002) argue that lack of participation from younger voters in particular skews the political agenda, which, in turn leads candidates to not address issues pertinent to younger voters; which, of course, may contribute to young voters' cycle of non-participation. This is where the debate about voter turnout often becomes circular—candidates do not listen to non-voters, yet citizens may be non-voters because candidates and elected officials do not listen to them.

There are those who claim that the lack of voter turnout is not necessarily an indicator of an unhealthy democracy. Eckstein (1966) also argues that non-participation is healthy for democracy because it indicates content with the system; and Huntington

(1974) argues that limited voting prevents an overburden on the system (complete participation would overrun the system). Finally, as the *New Statesman* (2001) argues, it might not be apathy on the part of younger voters that keeps them from the polls, rather it might actually be active and informed protest against the government and the political system.

The debate about whether increased voting is desirable or not will continue as long as the debate in democratic theory continues about the virtues of citizen participation as a component of representative democracy. Some have offered reasons why citizens do not vote in an effort to better understand non-voting publics. Goodin and Dryzek (1980) go so far as to suggest that it actually makes sense not to vote – there is no efficacy in this singular act. Efficacy is, of course, a key component of both the role of the citizen and voting in democratic theory. If a citizen does not feel that his/her single vote matters, then there is no need to vote or participate because this action will not influence government decisions. More importantly, in considering some of the earlier definitions of participation, if the government is not influenced by citizen input, then there is no real need to participate by voting.

DeLuca (1995) suggests that our political system causes apathy. The lack of efficacy, the disjointed involvement of the classes, and the ineffectiveness of government actions make increased apathy inevitable. Abramson and Aldrich (1982) agree that participation declines because of a decrease in efficacy. Younger generations in particular feel this lack of efficacy. Cassel and Luskin (1988) argue that education, age, and difficulty in voter registration all impact the ability of people to vote. For example, individuals who are not able to vote during the hours that polls are open because of



employment or other restrictions are more limited in their ability to participate by the election system. Individuals who feel a lack of efficacy or distrust with the government will not make the effort to overcome even minor systemic limitations in order to vote. Finally, Rosenston and Hansen (1993) argue that decreases in activism are due to a lack of party mobilization, suggesting that systemic factors such as political party operations may play a role in declining citizen participation.

All of these studies point to certain facts that seem undeniable: No matter what the cause (systemic or attitudinal), younger voters are turning out in fewer numbers. While it might be acceptable to have some decrease in voter turnout, there are certain inevitable problems if the trend continues and the impact on democracy could potentially be detrimental. Of course, traditional democratic theorists would argue that self-governance requires participation from the electorate. However, how that participation should be defined is not—or should not be—limited to the vote.

*Non-Voters: Who Are They?*

Perhaps one way to further understand the impact of turnout on our democratic system is to better understand not only why people do not vote, but who makes up the majority of people who do not vote (aside from young citizens). Peck (2002) argues that non-voters are typically much less partisan than voters; they focus on government performance issues (such as the economy) and less on ideology; they tend to prefer who is already winning (i.e. incumbents); and tend to lean more liberal in their views, although ideological stance is determined by issue rather than party preference. Hays (1998) suggests that there are three main reasons why people do not vote. First, their lifestyle makes it difficult – they are not home, not connected to their community, or have

a hard time getting to the polls. Second, they might lack knowledge; and they do not trust the media to give them the information they might require to make informed voting decisions. Third, they have little interest in the government, or feel that the politicians do not care about them; and they have no particular issues to vote for or against. DeLuca (1995) argues that people may be apathetic, but they do not choose to be so. Rather, they feel that they have no reason to be involved in the system because the system does not work. Popkin (1994) argues that an increase in education does not increase voter turnout. In short, people who do not vote do so for different reasons.

Doppelt and Shearer (1999) offer the most detailed profile of non-voters. They argue that people have various reasons for not voting, and all need different motivations to vote. They offer five types of non-voters. “Doers” are individuals who are active in different social ways, but do not vote. They may participate in certain social, even political activities, but do not take the time or effort to vote, perhaps because of a feeling of lack of efficacy, or because they feel that doing something actively in the community is more effective. The “unplugged” are people who do not gather the information to vote, who do not bother to be involved in the system in any form. The “irratables” are those who are discouraged by the system. They might understand it, yet do not want to participate in it. The “don’t-knows” offer multiple excuses for not voting, including everything from it being too complicated, to it being too difficult to get to the polls. The “alienated” individuals are those who are old, poor, or not educated, who are left alone by the system and therefore leave the system alone. Several different methods may be needed to increase voter turnout among these various types of non-voters. While Doppelt

and Shearer (1999) describe non-voter types, further work is needed to find out how to motivate each type.

Understanding who non-voters are is helpful in understanding how motivating citizens to vote might work, but it also indicates what others have already speculated: namely, that there is a certain inequality based on class more than anything else that seems to alienate citizens. Lower income citizens are not able to afford to be highly involved. Getting individuals motivated to vote is incredibly problematic if they are not a part of the system.

One suggestion is that urgency, or when the nation is in trouble, might motivate people to action and get them interested and active. Certainly, recent national events should be an indicator of that fact as the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy might have sparked greater involvement. Peck (2002), however, notes that this tragedy did not inspire an increase in voter turnout or civic participation. Skocpol (2003), however, argues that there was an increase in civic participation, but not an increase in voter turnout after September 11<sup>th</sup>. She suggests that Americans changed their attitudes about civic involvement, but they did not change their behavior. Particularly, even as they became more civically engaged, that engagement did not translate that into voting at the polls in the 2002 mid-term elections. This may change, of course, in subsequent national elections as national elections typically produce more turnout than mid-term and local elections. One might be optimistic and suggest that the recent war in the Middle East and the ongoing “War on Terror” might also increase participation through voting in future national elections. As discussed previously, issue salience is particularly important to motivating citizen participation; and this “9-11” generation may rally around the current

geopolitical issues as a way of involving themselves in the political process.

Nonetheless, as was noted by Schmierback, Boyle, and McLeod (2005), the small surges in civic involvement after 9-11 were short-lived and not within the “standard patterns of social capital” (p. 344). If urgency is a motivating factor, it is not yet evident that it has yet trickled down to the voting booth.

### *Solutions to Voter Apathy*

Despite the debate about whether there has been a real and sustained voter decline, and whether or not that is good or bad for the democratic system, some researchers have dedicated time and resources to trying to solve the problem of the decline in civic participation. For the most part, these solutions are based on media and technological changes. Some hoped that the Internet’s impact on political involvement would be positive. Some even suggested that this technological advance was the ultimate marketplace for the exchange of ideas and for increasing civic involvement. If nothing else, it would serve as a way to redefine political involvement. However, since political involvement requires more than merely seeking out information, the Internet has not served as a panacea for participation problems.

Andersen and Cornfield (2003) explain that the Internet does not necessarily increase knowledge overall—another predictor of engagement. In the aggregate, people use the Internet more, but knowledge about candidates has remained relatively stable. Frantzich (1999) suggests that while new media seems to help a little bit, this tool, in and of itself, will not solve the problem of voter apathy. Furthermore, as Wilkins (2000) suggests, since the media cannot be blamed for cynicism towards the government and lack of participation, it certainly may not solve the problem.

Still, others argue that technology does help the electorate become less alienated. Pinkleton and Austin (2001) suggest that the media (traditional and non-traditional) can act as a catalyst for participation – just as well as it can serve to increase cynicism – and it has the power to steer the public in the direction of greater participation. Delli Carpini (2000) suggests that new technological advances help the engaged, but can also increase the interest of the non-engaged. New media are interesting and can spur further involvement, although how the Internet might effect change has yet to be explored with conclusive results.

The *Economist* (2003) argues that the Internet could lead to a demand for more direct democracy, thus increasing interest and participation by making voting and participation easier for citizens. Shah, McLeod, and Yoon (2001) argue that the use of the Internet by younger generations increased their trust and civic participation more than traditional forms of media. Due to its fast-paced nature and information exchange, younger adults find technology easier to use, and the information they gather helps them to participate more fully. Finally, Bucy and Gregson (2001) argue that civic engagement through the Internet legitimizes more direct participation and direct democracy. Technology and media are seemingly helpful in certain activities such as gaining knowledge and feeling more involved, but it has yet to produce a euphoric rush to the polls.

As this review has thus far illustrated, there seems to be a dominant theme within the civic engagement literature: our younger generation is no longer politically involved. As time passes, fewer and fewer young adults are showing up at the polls. Perhaps they are engaged in other ways, but they are not a part of the formal electoral process that has

been used to gauge our nation's democratic health. Therefore, the final section of this review turns to literature and possible explanations for generational differences among those who are and are not civically engaged.

*The "Generation Gap"*

Despite discussion about the definition of civic involvement, younger people seem to be less engaged, at least by measurements available to us currently. It should be noted, as Bennett (1990a) suggests, that there is no single factor that explains a decrease in voter turnout. Age is not an indicator of whether or not one will vote. However, as an aggregate, younger voters are not turning out at the polls as often as their predecessors. This is not, however, a generational "gap." For example, the comparison of turnout rates between 18 and 30 year olds is not as great a disparity as between 18 year olds and 50 year olds. Instead, there is a gradual decline over time of younger non-voters. Lyons and Alexander (2000) explain that age is not important to voter turnout and that political context is more important. That is, when citizens come of age will have an effect on their views about voting. Much like in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1996), as generations are replaced by new ones, so paradigms shift. This is true not only of scientific theories, but also of political activism and worldviews. Generational replacement has had a somewhat surprising impact on civic engagement. Although this arena of research is somewhat new, it seems worth further exploration.

Lyons and Alexander (2000) argue that voters need an important issue close to them if they are going to vote. As indicated previously, one such issue for current generations might be September 11<sup>th</sup> and the War on Terror. Much the same as WWII and the Depression increased interest in government activities, by 1996 those impacts had

decreased. Individuals need to be close to certain crises in order for behavior to change.

“The farther one moves away [temporally] from a defining social or political event, the less salient that event becomes to individuals” (Lyons & Alexander, 2000, p. 1019).

Political mobilization based on social or political events is still a strong cue for voters. It does not matter much when a person was born so much as what was going on when they were developing their value system. Lyons and Alexander (2000) conclude their point, “Thus we must conclude that a generation is more than a trend surrogate and indeed does appear to have a direct impact on one’s propensity to vote” (p. 1027). In other words, how a person develops will impact his/her inclination to vote and be involved, but also the political context in which that development takes place is important. Certain social or political events may have a temporary impact, but the overall trend to consistently be involved in politics requires a process of development over time. For example, despite increases in education, changes in parties, gender, and other variables, voting still decreases. It is important to understand that “While it is statistically impossible to isolate a pure generation effect, it is certainly significant and substantial” (Lyons & Alexander, 2000, p. 1031).

Klecka (2001) likewise agrees that change over time is important. He explains that the generation gap effect is weak at best, but that “Change over time appears to be more strongly related to other social factors and it would seem more fruitful to seek these rather than to continue speculating about ‘generation gaps’” (p. 373). Perhaps the best trend analysis comes from Putnam (2000) who argues that increasingly over time individuals have become less and less involved in groups. He argues, “The key question to ask about generational differences is not *how old are people now*, but *when were they*

*young?*” (p. 251). Putnam offers explanations for why individuals are no longer civically engaged, and thus why they do not vote. He argues:

One plausible explanation for the strong generational effects in civic engagement that pervade our evidence is the replacement of a cohort of men and women whose values and civic habits were formed during a period of heightened civic obligation with others whose formative years were different. (p. 272)

While Putnam (1997, 2000) focuses on social indicators, further exploration of this trend in the political arena specifically is offered by Ronald Inglehart and his colleagues.

Inglehart (1997) and others have offered a possible explanation for several changes in society through their study of cultural values across the globe. He offers his theory of “post-modernization,” based in economics and development, but with socio-political implications. Particularly, his studies focus on both developing and established democracies and trends evident in those democracies as indicators of social involvement. Inglehart arranges his studies of developing and established democracies by examining long-term cycles and trends. His findings suggest that generations move through stages as economies and social constructs, such as governments, change. Complex variable interaction led him to suggest that social changes are based on value shifts:

The evidence accumulated so far indicates that pervasive changes are taking place in basic values of the publics of industrialized and industrializing societies throughout the world. Moreover, these changes seem to be linked with intergenerational population replacement processes, which means that they are gradual, but have a good deal of long-term momentum. (Inglehart, 1997, p. 5)



As societies move from being poor to being rich, as they industrialize and develop, certain value changes occur over time. Those values are reflected in the social and political development, and behavior, of the citizens of those societies. The conclusions drawn from Inglehart's work are not necessarily to predict future changes, but rather to explain the trends that emerge as societies develop. In general, societies tend to move from poor to rich and become more stable, and with this development comes less of a reliance or concern for basic needs and a development of higher-level values. These higher-level values come from an increased sense of individualism, "Unprecedentedly high levels of security are producing an intergenerational shift from giving top priority to security to giving top priority to self-expression" (Inglehart, 1997, p. 113).

These changes occur with the development of high-tech societies and leads to an increased need for organization among individuals and their needs. Inglehart (1990) cites the moral majority in America as an example of how this happens. Specifically, he suggests that as higher-level needs take center stage, groups will begin to organize based on those values. The moral majority is one group that has developed as American democracy has shifted from industrialized to post-industrialization. Rather than communities rallying around basic security or protection—much like unions—groups gather based on value systems—such as the moral majority.

As development continues, the values shared and highlighted in the political system have changed. Inglehart suggests a lens for viewing these changes based on four theses, including: 1) there are substantial cross-cultural differences in certain basic attitudes and habits of different societies; 2) that those differences vary over time and place; 3) these new trends and changes can be traced and perceived; and finally, 4) that

while the economy and culture deal with two separate sets of variables they are inherently linked, mainly through economics (Inglehart, 1990). In short, he concludes, “Isolated attitudes can change overnight, but change in a central component of people’s worldview seems to take place, in large part, as one generation replaces another” (p. 423). In extrapolating Inglehart’s theses to voting behavior, I contend that the choice to vote and be active is not an isolated attitude, but part of one’s worldview. In order to visualize the trends in civic engagement—if Inglehart is correct—researchers must look at how individuals create themselves as part of the political process. Additionally, younger cohorts share a new set of values that older cohorts do not. These new values are what Inglehart calls “post-materialist” or “post-modern” values and include more individual rights, interests, and values such as artistic freedom or personal values.

How post-materialist values develop is based on the development of a society’s economic system. Quite literally, people are less concerned about basic needs like food, shelter, security, and so on and more concerned with social issues and values such as freedom of expression or the right to certain lifestyle changes. Post-materialistic concern lies less with the community and communal needs and more with the political self. This shift to postmodern values leads to shifts in party affiliations and philosophies, new social movements, and to an increase in activities of different types from traditional political activity (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995). Even as economies level off, the values still change and shift:

The early phases of economic development seem to produce a big return, not only in terms of life expectancy, but also in terms of human happiness. Economic development eventually reaches a point of diminishing returns not only in life

expectancy, but also in terms of human happiness. This leads to a gradual but fundamental shift in the basic values and goals of the people of advanced industrial societies. (Inglehart, 2000, p. 2)

As individuals become less focused on the basic needs of human life, they become more focused on quality of life issues.

These new sets of values are key to the survival of democracies: “Mass values and attitudes are a major influence on whether or not democratic institutions survive in a given society” (Inglehart, 2000, p. 4). This, in turn, influences the citizens of a given democracy. One interpretation would be that mature democratic institutions give rise to the cultural syndrome of self-expression values. In other words, “democracy makes people healthy, happy, tolerant, and trusting and instills postmaterialist values (at least in the younger generation)” (Inglehart, 2000, p. 6). But as Inglehart himself notes, this is not always the case (take the Soviet Union, for example).

Younger generations do, in fact, develop cultural values differently than older generations. One can argue, quite persuasively, that one reason why individuals do not participate in traditional ways is because as a generation shifts away from the need for government, their focus on other higher-order often more individualistic values (e.g., the environment, civil rights, etc.) requires their efforts to be placed in more social movements, grassroots organizations, or volunteer services in local communities. In short, the government becomes invisible because it is not necessary for survival, even though it does play a role in how these movements ultimately succeed or fail.

Bennett (1998) argues that while satisfaction with one’s country or government might be low, satisfaction with local and personal life can be high. He concludes, “What

changed? It's the economy" (Bennett, 1998, p. 750). Bennett (1998) further suggests that the difference between Putnam's explanations for loss of social capital and Inglehart's explanations for declining participation is economic. Putnam does not seriously take into consideration the impact of economic development, as much as social development, on social activities by members of a given society. This is not to suggest Putnam is wrong in his conclusions about participation, but merely that there are other explanations for participation in civic activities. Bennett (1998) concludes, "Beyond the disconnection between government and emerging lifestyle concerns, individuals continue to display active engagement with politics and social problems" (p. 758). The "disconnect" that Bennett describes might be the missing link between political inaction and engagement. Furthermore, this disconnect is consistent with Inglehart's conclusions about the impact of postmodern values on civic activity. Civic activity does not stop, but it does change substantially as economies develop and grow.

This change is often quite slow in its progression. Inglehart (1995) explains the generational replacement process, which does not function like the generation gap concept. First, generational replacement may have one of six affects on value system change: have no effect on value change, create a trend, contribute to a trend, prevent a trend from continuing, impede a trend, or reverse a trend. As generations change and values shift, the values of that generation are not necessarily changed permanently or completely. Generational replacement seems to have a particular impact on postmodern value change more than on materialist or traditional values. Values change for the short term as well as the long term, but generational replacement generally reflects long-term value change. Inglehart (1995) concludes that generational replacement does not rest

heavily on age difference cohorts; that generational replacement is the key to any long term change; and that the trend towards post materialism will continue to affect citizens differently depending on their own political context and social development.

When applied to the question of civic engagement, Inglehart's theory helps put into perspective changing social movements, interests, and activities. His thesis lends credence to the possibility that the way civic engagement (and democratic health) has been measured (i.e., the vote) is no longer a viable measure for understanding the civic tendencies of newer generations. It also suggests that the activity of civic involvement is not necessarily dead or weakening, but that the issues that are important to younger generations is necessarily different in that they are focused less on public policy and more on individual interests. Males (2000) cautions that blaming younger generations for problems or for apathy is problematic. He suggests that the younger generation is not to blame for social ills any more than previous generations, and continuously suggesting that members of younger generations are necessarily bad or lazy could motivate them to further inaction against the older, and more prominent, generations in power. Furthermore, as he suggests, older generations created the younger ones and left them with a different set of rules. Inglehart (1997, 2000) is suggesting that these new rules or values are not necessarily bad, and that replacement of old values with new ones will continue to take place.

I also suggest that we are experiencing a unique time in American history. Based on this review of current literature, it is possible that what we may be seeing in voting trends is not an apathetic group of young adults so much as a group of young adults who think slightly differently about what is and is not important. More importantly, young

generations might now have a different way of affecting social and political change. Some discussion of these generational differences is necessary.

Studying these generational changes is necessary for a better understanding of civic involvement. Exploration of the impact of Inglehart's theory has yet to gain popularity among civic engagement scholars. Yet, in his conclusions we find that there may be hope for needed social change:

Similarly, the emergence of advanced industrial society with an increasing share of the public having higher education, being employed in the service sector, and feeling assured that their survival needs will be met, gives rise to a process in which high levels of subjective well-being and postmodern values emerge—and in which a variety of attributes, from equal rights for women to democratic political institutions, become increasingly likely. (Inglehart, 1997, p. 107)

The difficulty in studying large shifts in values through traditional means (quantitative surveys of values or measures of civic participation) lies in the fact that previous conceptualizations of civic engagement and political activism are based in old value structures. If Inglehart (1990) is correct, then new value structures would indicate a need for new ideas about civic engagement. The study presented in the following chapters is an attempt to adopt Inglehart's thesis of generational replacement and societal post-modernization, explore new possibilities for civic engagement, and explore the differences between generations in consideration of civic activity.

#### *Political Talk*

As discussed previously, personal conversation and talk about politics is important to the democratic process. Understanding this type of discourse may be

particularly important to researchers who are interested in the way individuals construct themselves and their roles in the political context and how they engage themselves in that process based on their perceptions. Examining the talk of citizens from different generations might also help us understand some of the changing participation levels. LeVasseur and Carlin (2001) suggest that empirical examinations of the public sphere should “pay attention to ordinary citizens’ deliberative discourse” (p. 408). This is particularly important because, as they conclude, most individuals argue from a point of self-interest and egocentricity. Individuals focus on policy from their personal experience with it, and ultimately this is spiraling towards an individualistic society rather than one that is community-based. This research is consistent with Shudson’s (1998) commentary about the private citizen replacing the public citizen.

Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000) argue that interpersonal political talk is key to actual democratic practice. These political conversations may include talk about “national government, local-state government, the economy, and foreign happenings” (p. 81). They also found that respondents do not avoid political conversation or politics in general, despite conventional wisdom. Instead, respondents indicate that they feel free to talk about politics with others. Holbert, Benoit, Hansen and Wen (2002) found that citizens find useful information through their political talk with others and use this information in understanding campaigns. This conclusion is also consistent with focus group studies that have investigated political conversation as a part of the democratic process (Gamson, 1992; LeVasseur & Carlin, 2001). These focus group studies are somewhat limited by their design in that they are asking individuals who volunteer to participate in political and social discussions about their willingness to talk about politics

with others. It seems that individuals who are willing to participate in such studies would be more likely to talk about politics than perhaps other citizens. Nonetheless, these studies are an important part of understanding *how* individuals use political conversation to construct their political realities and their role in the political process.

McLeod, Kosicki, and McLeod (1994) found that “interpersonal communication has become part of the participation process rather than simply an antecedent to voting” (p. 144). Additionally, Hart and Jarvis (1999) found that despite differences in historical time periods, political interests, or the rise in egocentric values, individuals still do talk to one another about politics. And McLeod et. al. (1994) support this when they claim that “Even discussion with strangers” may have an effect on voting or participation. Citizens may or may not see their political talk as an act which defines them as citizens, but the function of political talk is still relatively the same: to maintain a link between the individual and political process.

Perhaps the most notable work on the subject of political talk is provided by Gamson (1996). In his book, *Talking Politics*, Gamson examines 188 participants in different focus group interviews. He found that individuals in these groups work to establish their identity and discuss their involvement in the political process based on their perceived identity in that process. He found that individuals are willing to discuss political issues and voice their opinions. However, individuals will only *act* on political interests when an issue is particularly salient, and salience is determined by issue proximity. Issues must be recent, perceived to be important, and perceived to have an impact on the individual in order for citizens to become active (Gameson, 1996). These findings are consistent with the idea that citizens are becoming more individualistic in



their focus, but does not suggest that political action is not taken for the good of the community.

Gamson also found that individuals understood the need to negotiate meaning about political events. This is perhaps the most interesting finding from Gamson's work. He suggests that individuals use "conversational resources" (p. 117) to communicate their knowledge about political issues. He offers three such resources: the media, personal experience, and popular wisdom. Each of these resources are integrated and utilized by citizens when they converse. Knowledge about political issues, then, not only comes from the media; it is also shared among the individuals in groups based on conventional ideas about politics and individual experiences with certain issues. This is a key element in understanding why individuals may or may not act in the political process, but it is also important in understanding how they talk about themselves as a part of that process. Traditional indicators of political knowledge (education, social class) are no longer indicators of civic engagement; rather, individual conversations which draw on wisdom, experience, and the media are part of the communicative engagement of citizens.

#### Research Questions

The study undertaken here is centered around the idea of the rise of individualism, the assumption of generational value changes, and the thesis that generational replacement has had some effect on how citizens perceive themselves and others in the political process. Therefore, political "talk" is necessarily important in exploring the relationship between citizen participation, generational differences, and the creation of political selves. Three research questions are utilized in organizing this study and

exploring the implications of generational replacement on value change and political involvement.

RQ1: How do individuals describe their involvement in the political process?

This question allows individuals the opportunity to describe and define political process, civic involvement, and their own perceptions of their civic actions. Specifically, this question will be addressed in an open-ended fashion allowing the researcher to better define terms and explore how individuals talk about their own involvement. Specifically, thematic consistencies and inconsistencies across the generations will be explored. Further probing will lead to additional questions, examining the key terms and themes that individuals use when they talk about their political involvement and the specific activities used to define or illustrate one's political activity.

RQ2: How do citizens from different age groups describe themselves and others involved in the political process?

This question is specifically aimed at exploring differences in generations and each generation's perceptions of other generations. Inglehart's thesis requires that generational differences in values be visible or discernable. Therefore, this question asks for individuals to describe each other, and then an evaluation of their responses will be made which will be focused on the differences across groups (across generations). This question examines whether or not individuals perceive the political process, and their involvement in that process, differently based on their experiences and their peers' experiences. Furthermore, are individual citizens aware of how other generations involve themselves in the political process? Finally, how do individuals view their generational counterparts' participation activities?

This question also points to another phenomenon that may occur in political talk between citizens, namely the “third person effect” (TPE). Citizens do have a tendency to perceive themselves differently than they do other citizens—no matter what generational differences may be in play. TPE is born out of the sociological theory of attribution (Weiner, 1985). This theory suggests that individuals attribute qualities to the “other” or a “third person” differently than they attribute those same qualities to themselves. It is, in essence, a perceptual bias where an individual feels that they are affected or react differently to stimulus to which they and others may be exposed. More often than not, individuals feel that they are affected less than others by certain messages and ideas (Cohen & Davis, 1991).

This theory has been tested with different kinds of media messages, but important to the present study is the work of Cohen and Davis (1991) who found that broadcast messages and political advertising produce results which are consistent with TPE. Individuals who watched advertisements or received messages felt that they would respond more positively than others who received the same political messages. Perloff (1989) also found that individuals will assess their level of influence from messages differently than they gauge how the message influenced others. In all cases, individuals feel that they are not as likely to respond as strongly as others will to messages. An example is provided by Perloff (1989) who found that participants in his study reported that they believe and act on public service announcements while other people would not. He also found that participants reported they were not as willing to accept or believe negative messages as much as others might.

TPE is important in the present study for two reasons. First, it is likely that participants will believe they are better citizens or react more positively for the right reasons than others might. This may become apparent in their discussions of political participation and as they describe their role as citizens. Secondly, intergenerational differences may be exaggerated by TPE. In order to account for TPE, this study does not specifically attempt to test the effect, but the researcher will be aware of the possibility of TPE in citizen discussions and account for this effect in data interpretation. There has not been a study specifically geared toward finding TPE among generations or a study on generations and TPE in regard to political talk. Therefore, although it does not necessarily influence the RQs or affect the study's design, TPE is considered as an important explanatory factor in understanding the results of this study.

RQ3: How do citizens engage in communication about the political process?

This question is geared specifically toward understanding the interactions individuals have within groups when they discuss politics. Citizens may engage in different types of explanations or exploration when they describe their political activity or political opinions. It is within this interaction that communication patterns may be found and can be illuminating in further exploring how individuals discursively construct their political selves and realities. Furthermore, this RQ will examine the conversational styles and tools citizens employ when talking about politics.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

Based on the research questions, and dedication to the *communicative engagement* approach outlined in the previous sections, the chosen method of exploration for the current study is hermeneutical phenomenology. Phenomenology as a methodology “questions the way we experience the world” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5) and “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of meaning of our everyday experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). In attempting to understand the political talk of individuals within groups and how they use that talk as a means of constructing their political experience, phenomenology is the appropriate lens for this exploration. This methodology is also based on the rather similar assumptions of social constructionism. Socially constructed selves are made evident through the language that individuals use in their conversations with others; therefore a close analysis of how individuals talk about their experiences is necessary to understand this phenomenon. Hermeneutics is the interpretation of experience through analysis of text and requires the researcher to not only observe “lived experience” but to interpret its meaning (Van Manen, 1990, p. 24). Therefore, the analysis of this study is based on a hermeneutical phenomenology, or the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ descriptions of their political lives.

In order to gather data for analysis, the group experience and discussion of citizens' feelings about civic engagement are best captured through focus group interviews (FGIs). Thus, this chapter begins with an overview of the assumptions of hermeneutical phenomenology and is followed by a description of the methods of data collection and data analysis. The following sections describe the assumptions behind the methodology for this particular study by acknowledging the philosophical paradigm of the researcher. An explanation of this kind is necessary for two main reasons: First, it functions to provide a justification for this particular qualitative methodology in light of the research questions; and second, to elucidate the function of the researcher in this type of analysis. Finally, this chapter outlines the method of data collection (FGIs) and the mode of analysis of the texts produced from these FGIs.

#### *Research Paradigm and Assumptions*

The overarching paradigm of this study is a modified interpretivist paradigm, which is modified in the sense that the researcher functions as the interpreter of lifeworld experiences as they are expressed through the language of others. The researcher is not merely focused on a predetermined written text. The text in this case is created by citizens who are describing their civic engagement practices in a group setting. Within the interpretivist paradigm, the chosen methodology is the hermeneutical phenomenology. This interpretative methodology calls for a deep reading of rich data provided through the FGIs. This deep reading is realized through a thematic analysis of the texts based on phenomenological interpretation. The data collection of FGIs provides appropriate and useful data for a thematic analysis which recognizes the every day experiences of citizens in their construction of political involvement through language.

This process, from methodology to analysis, follows the interpretive paradigm of the researcher while still allowing the freedom of creative social construction for the creators of the text (the participants).

Schwandt (2000) lists three main philosophical approaches to qualitative research: interpretivist, philosophical hermeneutics, and social constructionism. In working with focus groups, I generally adhere to hermeneutical phenomenology with what Andersen (1996) calls “justificationist” influences. As an interpretivist, I believe that human communication is made up of speech acts. This is to say that when we speak, we are acting, that our acts are visible, and can be understood. I argue that we cannot remove our biases and perspectives. Instead, we must attempt to outline our biases, highlight and “bracket” them, and attempt to reduce the phenomenon to its essence. I believe a trained analyst can “get at” what the meaning of communication might be for others. I believe that we cannot reproduce exact meaning but can only produce new meaning. In other words, while a researcher cannot exactly reiterate the meanings exchanged in a focus group (or any interview or ethnographic study), they can attempt to reproduce some parts of it and produce a new perspective on that meaning.

I also believe that meaning can be found in texts and interpreted as such. As a justificationist, I argue that as a researcher I can make claims about meaning, but they must be justified—that is, found in the texts. A justificationist is not in opposition to the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist assumes that the visible acts of a communicator can be filtered and interpreted for meaning while the justificationist assumes the same. The justificationist is a type of interpretivist in the sense that the justificationist looks to interpret communicative acts by utilizing those acts as evidence

that leads the interpreter to a conclusion. In the case of focus group interviews, this generally means that I ascribe to the belief that researchers can ask questions of others, find meaning in their answer, and make *new claims* from those answers. I do not, however, suggest that focus group research is the only way to go about making claims. Each approach to qualitative or quantitative research may or may not be able to make claims that are transferable or generalizable to others. Since qualitative research aims at making claims that are transferable to different settings and contexts, it is the aim of this study to build a strong case for how individuals might construct themselves inside or outside of the political system when they encounter their peers in a group setting.

An obvious assumption of this type of study is that individuals in group discussions will construct themselves through language (for further discussion of language and social construction see Gamson, 1992; Schwandt, 2000 ). Potter (1996) suggests that “the world...is constituted in one way or another as people talk it, write, and argue it” (p. 98). Therefore, the way individuals *talk* about something is the way they *construct* it for themselves and for others. Additionally, this phenomenon is best experienced through how individuals work together: “It is human interchange that gives language its capacity to mean, and it [language] must stand as the critical locus of concern” because of the human interchange that is involved (Gergen, 1994, p. 263-264).

*Methodology: Hermeneutical Phenomenology*

While hermeneutical phenomenology “does not problem solve” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 23), it does “appeal to our immediate common experience in order to conduct a structural analysis of what is most common, most familiar, and most self-evident to us” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 19). From these shared experiences, the job of the researcher is to



offer further discussion and analysis of what the experience might mean and what impact it might have. The texts for analysis can be found in multiple ways, including individual interviews, ethnographic recording, or as in the case of the present study, focus group interviews.

There are eight principles for hermeneutical phenomenology according to Van Manen (1990). These include the beliefs that hermeneutical phenomenology should examine lived experiences; that it examine phenomena as it “presents itself to the consciousness” (p. 9); that the research focus on “essence”; that the research serves as a description of experience and meaning; that the research is “human scientific” in nature (p. 11); that the attention of the researcher should focus on “thoughtfulness”; that the study examines what it means to be human; and that the research is a “poetizing” activity (p.13). At the core of this research, these eight principles or goals suggest that hermeneutical phenomenology pays attention to how the consciousness is imagined or affected by human navigation of meaning. The researcher, then, must pay particular attention to the human experience as others bring it to light. The process of how meaning is created is as essential as the meaning itself. In an attempt to understand the political lifeworld of the participants in this study, all eight goals were adhered to at the data collection and data analysis stages. The political life is a lived experience, the language we use brings to consciousness our perspectives, and this research focuses on the human experience with respect to how participants engage each other and describe their involvement in political activity.

The goal of the phenomenological researcher may not be to solve problems, but it is to bring the nature (essence) of those problems to light in order that further experience

with it might enlighten human involvement in the lifeworld. The goals of the specific study presented here are within the realm of Van Manen's eight goals. With the understanding that solving the problem of political involvement is a large and universal task which may or may not be attainable, I hope to understand the reasons behind this particular human experience by inviting citizens to share their experience and bring that experience to light—perhaps not just to allow study participants to bring this issue to their own consciousness, but to further understand their social consciousness. This goal is possible because as Van Manen (1990) explains, “To be conscious it to be aware, in some sense, of some aspect of the world. And thus phenomenology is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being” (p. 9). In the case of this study, the significant world of the human being in relation to civic engagement and the political system is what guides the research questions and subsequently the method of data collection and analysis.

#### Data Collection Method: Focus Group Interviews

In order to develop the texts for this analysis, the focus group interview (FGI) was utilized as a way to get at individual interpretation of lived experience as well as observe the group dynamic of lived experiences in regard to participants' political involvement. Understanding the FGI and the role of the moderator is an important part of absorbing the richness of lived experience through the researcher's perspective. Therefore, the following will further outline my approach to focus group studies as I first look at the assumptions of focus group data collection; second, examine the role of the moderator/researcher in the process; third, discuss the design of group interviews; fourth,

describe the participants; and outline the possibilities for data analysis. Finally, I will describe some of the strengths and weaknesses of this type of research.

*Assumptions of Focus Group Data Collection*

There are several assumptions about focus group data collection which generally are described along two lines: assumptions about the data, and assumptions about the source of that data (human interaction). Lederman (1990) pays attention to the latter. She suggests that the assumptions of focus group data collection include three important parts: an understanding that humans are good sources of information, they are reliable in their reports about themselves, and that they can communicate about themselves. Such assumptions are important to any qualitative research (not just focus groups) because the analysis is, ultimately, a study of the individual's *lifeworld* (Kvale, 1998; Schwandt, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Morgan and Spanish (1984) outline key assumptions of focus group *data*. They argue that in focus group data collection we can ask questions which are of interest to the researcher, but we can collect more interesting and potentially useful data when the group interacts with the researcher while still answering questions the researcher wants answered. Van Manen (1990) also addresses the issue of the role of data. He suggests the hard sciences assumes data is an observable and objective object removed from its context and experience. Human interaction data, such as the data collected in this study, is not an object; instead, it is an experience which is represented by interpretation. Therefore, the FGIs provide an opportunity to witness and subsequently interpret other individuals or groups' experiences.

Additionally, I assume that groups will provide us with different or more interesting data than individual interviews do, and that researchers can collect data based on what is important to the participants in the groups rather than solely remaining focused on the answers to questions that we thought to ask as researchers. These assumptions lead to what Lindlof (1995) labeled as “expecting ambiguity.” Ambiguity refers specifically to the researcher’s relationship to the data collection and analysis process. Instead of the research questions functioning to dictate results, the researcher opens up the opportunity for data to change and develop rather than adhere to a binary or close-to-binary answer system set up through the researcher’s initial design. This ambiguity lies in the openness of the group discussion and allows the individuals and the group as a whole to decide what is and is not important to the discussion as well as where the discussion should flow. Focus group researchers need to understand these assumptions and expect ambiguity in order to use this method of data collection to its fullest while also adhering to the principles of hermeneutical phenomenology.

#### *Role of the Moderator*

The moderator certainly should guide the questions for the group, but I understand what the assumptions noted above suggest, namely, that participants will provide us with not only answers to our questions, but they will pose new questions to each other, suggest what is important to them, provide new perspectives, and help the researcher understand more fully. In order for this to happen, the moderator’s job is not that of an interviewer; rather, the job of the moderator is to listen, to keep the conversation on track, and to *have respect for* the participants. Schwandt (2000) suggests that an “ethic of care” is required in this type of research, that the participants are of

utmost importance, and that the job of the researcher in representing participants' life worlds is a keen responsibility. The ethic of care refers to the idea that human researchers must show respect for the observations they make about others' lifeworlds. This ethic requires the researcher to adhere to open communication, to learn from it, and to interpret the experience in light of the participants' perspectives instead of just the researcher's perspective.

There are several ways in which group interviews may be conducted and guided by the moderator. Lindlof (1995) simply suggests "a light hand." That is, a gentle guide to keep the group on track, but not necessarily always redirecting the conversation to where the researcher wants it to go. Kvale (1998) suggests that there are different types of structured interview methods that are applicable to the FGI setting as well. He outlines the advantages and disadvantages of these different interviewing styles. The Socratic Method is pointed and direct, but the goal is to get the participants talking. However, it is typically used to "pin down" answers and this approach may not be helpful in a focus group interview. This type of interview is not designed to allow the individuals in the groups to construct their own realities. The counseling interview is also directed and guided, but the moderator talks less and listens more. Finally, the conversational style tends to allow the group to talk about the issues they wish to address (Kvale, 1998).

All of these styles of moderating focus groups have their advantages and disadvantages. I prefer the "invisible hand" of a moderator—an approach where the moderator seemingly becomes part of the group, guides the questions gently, listens closely, and attempts to allow the participants to highlight what is important to them.

*Designing Groups and Selecting Participants*

There is no doubt that getting groups together with multiple scheduling conflicts, finding a place to meet and getting participants to an interview session is difficult. In fact, like other data collection techniques, it is often difficult to find heterogeneous groups, groups outside of the academic or artificial laboratory setting, and groups who are willing to get together to talk. Designing the interview requires work on the part of the researcher in making the group comfortable, finding a non-threatening place for them to meet, and finding ways to get them talking. Focus group participants that are going to converse with a researcher and their fellow group members need to be comfortable with the questions, the group, the researcher, and social settings. However, several problems occur with group designs. First, you may have people in the group who do not participate. It is important to attempt to get these individuals to talk without being forceful. Second, you may have an individual in a group who is particularly verbose and does not allow others to speak; the moderator should control for this as well. Getting off topic is another consideration, which again is addressed by the moderator. The group design and the moderator are key facets in getting a good amount of valuable data about your particular question. Therefore, the group size should be between six and ten people. Some have argued that groups of 4 are sufficient (although groups of eight produced more ideas than groups of four), and that groups of fifteen are too big for equal participant involvement (Fern, 1982).

The questions asked of participants in FGIs should be open ended and their meaning should be open to several points of view. This does not mean that queries should be so vague as to not be relevant to the study's overall research questions. While

some suggest that FGIs are more like ethnographic discussions, it is important to remember that the amount of freedom given to participants is guided by the research question. Prompting the participants for further information is acceptable as long as the prompting is not leading (e.g., “You certainly don’t mean to suggest that voting is a waste of time, do you?”). Yet, a moderator nodding his/her head, or other nonverbal encouragement for participants to continue are reasonable responses. However, leading questions render the data less credible, violates the “life world” mentality, and violates the ethical basis of the FGI. Questions should be asked until it is clear the group is finished with their discussion of a particular topic or issue, and this “saturation” should be carefully gauged by the researcher. However, this does not mean the more questions posed the better. Rather, the moderator needs to listen and understand how the group is functioning.

#### *Strengths and Weaknesses of FGIs and Data*

Focus groups first became popular thanks to work in marketing research. Although he rarely talked about the data generated from focus group discussions, Lazarsfeld (1972) likewise used this method in his mass communication studies. In short, the FGI is not a new method in social science research and seems to be useful in all types of research. FGIs have proven to be useful in multiple arenas of inquiry. Like all research methods, FGIs have both their strengths and their weaknesses. When they were used initially, focus groups were paid for by the sponsors of the studies and therefore were open to charges of bias and manipulation. The FGI can, however, provide a lot of information in a short period of time, they can generate information that cannot be provided through survey research and FGIs allow for a large number of people to be

asked questions easily and cost effectively. Constructing verbatim transcriptions and the analysis are also time consuming. But FGIs, as Morgan (1988) points out, do not have any more or fewer problems than other types of qualitative research. For example, FGIs still struggle with the human response problem of validity and verification, they require time, and they take place in unnatural settings. However, we may best understand the relative advantages of FGIs in contrast to two other data collection techniques: 1) individual interviews, and 2) participant observation. As Morgan (1988) alludes, such comparisons help the researcher understand the problems and the advantages of this type of research.

Unlike participant observation, FGIs occur in unnatural settings. Participant observation takes place not only in a more natural setting, but the conversation is more naturally flowing. In both types of data collection a group discussion may occur and data is collected, but the FGI allows the researcher to control more of the conversation and to guide the conversation. Participant observation, however, allows the researcher to collect more than just verbal communication. How the group participants act and interact non-verbally is also noted. The difference between the FGI versus participant observation is based on whether or not participants will actually agree to participate in a focus group discussion and do so in a manner consistent with how they work individually (are they answering questions out of peer pressure, for example); but this is a problem in both the FGI and in the participant observation. Participants in FGIs may feel more threatened by *knowing* a researcher is there and asking questions, but the researcher at least is able to guide the discussion towards her/his interests. In both cases, either method may be appropriate, depending on the research questions. Participant observation is often best



for cultural/identity questions while FGIs are more appropriate for topical or more focused questions that may not be associated with an identifiable setting or culture.

FGIs also facilitate data collection from a larger number of people in a shorter period of time than the individual interview. The individual interview allows the researcher to become more deeply involved with an individual, perhaps get at some underlying responses much more easily, and guide the conversation. However, FGIs allow the researcher to see how individuals talk about certain concepts in groups; and in FGIs the researcher is able to find out what is important to the group. As Morgan (1988) suggests, researchers have a tendency to forget that what is important to the group may not be the same as what the researcher thinks is important. Instead, opening the floor for discussion about a topic will suggest to the researcher how the group as a whole thinks about the topic rather than directing the questions him/herself. However, in an individual interview ascertaining shared agreement is not possible and the group's freedom to influence the discussion agenda in the FGI is traded off for the depth of information an individual interview may yield. Morgan (1988) argues that there is more apparent juxtaposition between individual interviews and focus group interviews than between FGIs and participant observation because the differences between FGIs and individual interviews manifest themselves in a trade-off of advantages and disadvantages.

However, I would suggest that the researcher must look at the topic/questions he/she is examining to understand which method works best. Focus groups are probably better for questions about social action, public policy, and community issues as such topics involve group interaction. Topics about sex, disease, or other uncomfortable concepts might be better reserved for the individual interview where the participant

would feel more comfortable (possibly) providing more in-depth responses. In short, FGIs allow for the study of human interaction and processes while individual interviews allow for a deeper exploration of a specific phenomenon.

Fern (1982) conducted a quantitative study to determine how FGIs work and found that they were not as productive in idea generation than individual interviews, that they were not any more or less productive as participant observation, and that larger groups did produce more ideas. Morgan (1988) points out, however, this is not a claim that FGIs are less effective for researchers. In fact, as Agar (1986) argues, there are problems with all types of research methods that are similar, even across quantitative as well as qualitative methods. All methods struggle with the same problems of answering questions about human behavior. A fundamental issue for all researchers is to provide convincing justification for their chosen research methods. FGIs can be designed to be effective by acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the method, asking open-ended questions which have a focus, finding a group of between 6-10 people, finding heterogeneous groups, and using an “ethic of care” for the participants’ lifeworld.

FGIs can be self-contained and can also be part of a larger project—depending on the specific research question and the answers that are provided by the group discussants. It should be remembered, however, the FGIs are used to get detailed information and a level of depth not achieved with quantitative methods as well as some other qualitative methods.

#### *FGIs as Method of Communication Analysis*

FGIs have been used for several different types of communication research. Bradford, Meyers, and Kane (1999) used focus groups as a way of examining

communication competence among Latino/a populations. Lederman (1983) examined high communication apprehension and its effects on behavior through FGIs. Press and Cole (1995) examined how women discuss media, science and abortion in small groups. Silk, Parrott, and Dillow (2003) examined group discussions about genetically altered food. Finally, McLaurin (1995) examined how culture affected the reception of messages to specifically targeted groups through FGIs. All of these studies are focused on how groups talk about different communication experiences, much like the study presented here. The focus on group discussion and the dynamism of how groups communicate, of course, is the strengths of the FGI.

Lederman (1983) audio taped small groups and performed a conversational analysis. This type of data analysis was important to her study because Lederman was looking specifically for agreement and disagreement in how the group participants interacted. Bradford, Meyers and Kane (1999) were specifically looking at how individuals communicated based on previous categories of discourse analysis. Therefore, they employed a content analysis as a way of testing categories and adding new ideas to those categories. Silk, Parrott and Dillow (2003) grounded their FGI study in the Theory of Planned Behavior and therefore utilized *a priori* categories for data analysis. All three of these studies took place across different time periods (for example, some were one-shot discussions, yet Silk, et. al., examined individuals over a period of three years), and all three had different numbers of participants en toto within their different groups.

Press and Cole (1995) and McLaurin (1995) both used groups of different sizes, focused on young citizens, and used thematic analysis for their data analysis. Thematic analysis was appropriate for these studies because the researchers were interested in how

individuals talked about communication experiences. Although McLaurin (1995) describes the research experience as more ethnographic in nature, both studies perform a thematic analysis on the data as a way of organizing and as a method of understanding how individuals chose to describe their communicative experiences. Thematic analysis is the technique of choice for data when the research question is focused on how individuals choose to recognize or describe their communicative experiences.

Utilization of the focus group method of data collection is popular when scholars are attempting to answer questions that require individuals to provide detailed answers about their life-world experiences. While this method is not commonly used in political communication research, in recent years it has become more popular. Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000) utilize the focus group method as well as LeVasseur and Carlin (2001) and Hart and Jarvis (1999) to discover how citizens deliberate about policy and public action. Still, the method of data analysis varies greatly across these studies. Hart and Jarvis (1999) utilize a computer program to count words and analyze their data. Finally, LeVasseur and Carlin (2001) utilized a combination of thematic analysis and content analysis to discover trends in respondent answers.

The combined conclusions of these studies seem to suggest that the method of data collection through focus groups provides rich data which may be analyzed in different ways. I believe, however, that the unique quality of FGIs as a way of finding detailed conversational responses to open-ended questions is lost when computer or systematic content analysis is used. Rather, it seems more useful based on the research questions presented in Chapter Two of this study to rely on a thematic analysis of the data. Furthermore, because the present study is meant as an exploration of new

definitions of civic engagement, using old categories for content analysis or a computer program which is pre-programmed with linguistic indicators or definitions would prevent any learning of possible intricacies of group responses. Therefore, the following method of data collection was conducted for this study.

Data for this study were collected in two phases that were conducted in 2000 and 2003-2004 (well before the 2004 presidential election in order to capture citizen responses during a non-campaign period). In 2000, nineteen focus groups were questioned about voter participation and their feelings about the political process after viewing the presidential debates for the general election between Al Gore and George W. Bush. Groups of young citizens and community members were gathered all across the country, watched the debates, and were interviewed and surveyed. In 2003-2004 the study was continued with individuals from the community and the student population of a mid-sized Midwestern university. Individuals involved in the 2000 data collection were presented with an immediate political stimulus in the context of an ongoing presidential election; whereas in 2003-2004 individuals were not presented with any mediated political stimulus and were not thinking about politics in the wake of a presidential general election. Phase one was part of a data collection for a larger project which investigated campaign issue and candidate image learning, sources of political information, and forms of information gathering.

In the phase one collection there was evidence of a phenomenon that was occurring in the discussions that was not addressed by the research questions for the original study. Namely, it became apparent in reading the transcripts that citizens made a distinction between their own involvement and the involvement of members of other age

groups. Specifically, student groups referred to older generations and the community members talked about younger generations as well as older citizens. In order to further understand this phenomenon, a second phase of data collection was necessary. In this phase the questions in the FGIs focused solely on how individuals from different age cohorts talked about their own involvement and the involvement of other citizens. In this second phase, the groups were also divided differently than they were in phase one. Phase one informed the researcher that additional and more focused questions were necessary to increase understanding of citizens' political lives.

The questions in phase one did require respondents to talk about the political process and their perceptions of it; however, the design and focus of phase one did not look for generational differences or specific social constructions of self-perception in the political arena. Therefore, phase two focuses on questions about perceptions across generations and also the questions more specifically address the research questions presented in Chapter Two (See Appendix A).

#### *Phase one*

At thirteen different universities across the country young citizens and community members were invited to participate in watching a presidential debate and to participate in a discussion following the debate. Young citizens were informed in their classes of this opportunity while the call for community members was done through flyers posted on and around campus. Young citizens were offered extra credit for their participation as is common in this type of data collection. Community members were invited through flyers and e-mail to be involved in the viewing of the presidential debates and the discussion following. They were not paid for their involvement and were encouraged to

bring family or friends to the discussion sessions. Therefore, a combination of different recruitment efforts were used.

In phase one, 194 participants were involved in this data collection which occurred over a one-month period in nine states (see Appendix B, Tables 1, 2 and 3). Of the 194 participants, 100 were female and 94 were male. The ages across the groups ranged from 18 to 82, with a mean age of 49. Political affiliation was slightly skewed as 45% of the participants identified themselves as Democrat, 31% identified as Republicans, and the other 24% identified themselves as Independent or Other. Although this mix represents a slightly larger Democratic population of voters, this distribution of participants does not affect the current study as political affiliation does not determine political involvement. As described in Chapter Two, other factors such as class, education, and age are more likely to affect involvement. Furthermore, the focus of this study is not on political ideology.

In phase one, participants filled out a survey, watched a presidential debate, filled out another survey, were involved in a focus group discussion, and then completed a final survey. (Other than participant demographics, survey data gathered during phase one data collection is not included as part of the current study.) The participants were given snacks during this discussion and participated in a round-table discussion format. Each debate was 90 minutes long and each discussion was approximately one hour long. In total, participants committed approximately three hours to the research session.

The groups were asked the same questions in all cases by trained moderators. Questions included in these FGIs may be found in Appendix C. Young citizens and adults talked about their interest in the political system, their voting behaviors, their

perceptions of the political system, the media, and other topics such as presidential debate formats and candidate evaluations.

The focus groups were audio taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then stored along with the audio tapes for future use. Transcription occurred over the period of the summer of 2001 and was performed by the principle researcher. The transcriptions were utilized for other studies, but a trend became apparent in this data that was not represented in the research questions for those studies. The researcher noted a frequent theme expressed in these discussions was generational differences or claims of difference by the participants through references to older and younger citizens' political attitudes and behaviors. These transcripts were utilized for this "left over" data (data that did not address specific RQ's in the larger phase one data collection effort) and phase two of data collection was designed specifically to explore this apparent finding. Due to the extensive nature of the groups (data collected at multiple sites throughout the U.S.), checks for verification were limited in this collection.

#### *Phase two*

Phase two of data collection was initiated for two reasons. First, the researcher was interested in further analysis of citizens' involvement in politics, how individuals perceived their role in the political system, and how individuals talked specifically about voter apathy and civic engagement. Second, new questions about the definitions of civic engagement geared specifically for the generational focus of this study were necessary.

Therefore, individuals from a small Midwestern town were invited to participate in a discussion about "political involvement." The sessions were audio taped and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The FGIs took place over a two month



period. The FGIs were organized into three groups: “Young citizens,” defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 30; “Adults” were defined as individuals between the ages of 30 and 50; and “Seniors,” who were defined as individuals above the age of 50. Each group was as diverse as possible with individuals representing different races, sexes, and cultures. In total, eleven focus groups were conducted for phase 2 of the data collection, including four young citizen groups, three adult groups, and four senior groups. However, only nine transcripts were used for analysis (three FGIs for each age group). The additional two transcripts, one each for both the young citizens and seniors, were unusable due to participant attrition and lack of participation from group members. Young citizens and community members were provided with snacks during the discussions. Also, some young citizens received extra credit for classes they were taking for their participation in the study.

Each of the groups consisted of 5-15 individuals. Appendix B (Table 4) illustrates the break down of each group. The three senior groups had an average of 8 participants with an average of 81 years. The three adult groups consisted of an average of 6 people and an average age of 41. The three young citizen groups averaged 10 participants and an average age of 19.

The discussions took place in a round-table format in a comfortable room found on campus or in the community. Each group talked for at least 30 minutes and a maximum of 90 minutes, with an average of 47 minutes for all groups. Political affiliation was not requested as part of this study. As previously mentioned, since the study was not aimed at partisan differences, but only political activity, the participants’

political affiliation was not important. Additionally, race and education levels were not measured because these factors were not included as part of the research questions.

Young citizens were informed in their communication classes of this opportunity for extra credit. They were then told that they could bring other individuals interested in this opportunity along with them to the discussions. Community members were acquired through flyers posted around campus and the surrounding area and through snowball contact. Senior groups gathered at an assisted living and senior community center. They volunteered their participation through activity directors and social gatherings. Due to the geographical proximity of all groups to the researcher, verification checks were made with members of the groups who were available in the 6 months after the FGIs took place. Individuals from each group were asked to read the findings and respond to them openly. Checks were made with at least two members of each group to serve as verification for the findings. Once the transcripts were complete and checked then analysis of the texts proceeded.

#### Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis

Data analysis, much like data collection and how a researcher approaches and interprets their data, is guided by the philosophy that the researcher adopts. My philosophy suggests the type of data analysis that I generally practice: analysis of themes that emerge from the data rather than imposing *a priori* categories on the data. Thematic analysis requires the researcher to examine the data, know it thoroughly, and understand the main issues expressed. Phenomenological analysis attempts to understand the “essence” of the data and thematic analysis attempts to identify trends, commonalities, and differences among participants’ responses. The phenomenological analysis through

thematic organization provides the most helpful method for this study as it is an attempt to answer questions about *how* participants communicate about political involvement. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to examine a large amount of data and provide meaningful summaries about the data so that knowledge claims can be made.

Van Manen (1990) describes thematic analysis as “the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (p.78). These dramatizations and evolving meanings are interpreted by the researcher and are present in all types of texts – from poetry to narrative to transcripts of human experience – as all texts are reflections of human experience. According to Van Manen’s further explication, “phenomenological themes may be understood as the *structures of experience*” (p. 79). These structures, present in the language of the text, are then represented by the researcher.

The researcher may choose from three different types of textual readings. According to Van Manen (1990) these include the “holistic reading approach,” the “selective or highlighting approach,” and the “detailed or line by line approach” (p. 93). The holistic approach requires the researcher to engage the text as a whole and to interpret meaning from the experience of the text in its entirety. The selective approach allows the researcher to examine the text and focus or highlight portions which seem more patently important. Finally, the detailed approach examines every word or line in a text to categorize these micro linguistic units individually and to draw conclusions.

The approach that is most useful to this study is the selective approach. The text—the complete discussion transcript—is a conglomeration of many participants at once as opposed to a single author and should not be seen as a functioning whole. To

view the text as a whole would mute certain distinctions made by the participants and dull the potential detail of the analysis. On the other hand, a detailed approach to the text would make it difficult to find patterns or trends within the text. As each unit (sentence or word) is examined as its own entity in a detailed textual analysis, the ability to group textual elements with others becomes more difficult. Additionally, because I am looking for individual's responses in a group setting, each participant's response may be longer or shorter, take more words or fewer than other participants' and the detailed reading would not take into account the unique nature of how individuals talk about their lifeworld. The selective approach, therefore, allows the researcher to utilize these unique responses and put them into a meaningful pattern. Also, the selective approach allows themes to emerge from the text rather than dictating how long they are or what unit best outlines a theme. In short, the theme in this analysis is determined by the qualitative interpretation of the researcher based on participant response rather than a quantification of the text into specific units.

The selective approach to thematic analysis of the FGI texts is the best method of analysis for this study for several reasons. First, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach allows the researcher to ask directed questions while allowing the participants to dictate the course of the discussion that follows. This creates a dynamic rather than a static text because several authors are writing it and because discussion can stop, start, restart, elaborate, and shift depending on the participants. A selective reading of the themes which emerge allows this dynamic nature to be more apparent than holistic or detailed readings. Second, the selective approach allows the researcher to interpret general trends and develop theoretical positions and propositions to best explain the

phenomenon expressed by the group. In a detailed or holistic reading, these trends become less obvious. Individual interviews, where there is only one author for a given text, allows for the holistic or detailed reading; yet, with FGIs, because the group is working together to create the text, the researcher must sort different responses and also respect the end results of the analysis of the text. FGI data collection is unique because of the number of participants, and therefore the data analysis should also be more dynamic and open. Although Van Manen (1990) does not advocate one type of thematic analysis over another, I argue that for this study the selective approach is the most appropriate because, based on Van Manen's descriptions, this approach offers unique advantages that fit the nature of FGI data.

Working with the verbatim transcripts of over 130 single-spaced pages from the Phase 2 collection and over 100 pages of double-spaced pages from Phase 1, each discussion was analyzed by the researcher and divided generationally. No set categories or themes were set at the time of analysis, therefore an open approach was used in the initial reading of the texts. Thematic analysis is done in a way that allows inductive coding of a text based on reading the texts openly. As Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, "coding is analysis" (p. 56). The act of coding the texts requires the researcher to examine the texts and look for trends, themes, and common denominators in the respondents' answers. The researcher employed the technique of constant comparison between the texts. This approach does not require a specific unit of analysis; however, for the purposes of this study the transcripts were cut into responses to each question and then divided into "themes" as units of analysis. Comparisons were made in two ways. First, the researcher examined and grouped similar responses from the transcript of one

FGI to the same questions. Second, the researcher examined similar responses to each question across groups. This provided a comparison within the groups as well as between groups. This method is important for finding themes across the groups, but also for finding differences between the groups' responses.

The constant comparison method is also helpful in determining the way individuals talk about particular subjects. Specifically, in determining the themes that groups developed, keywords or ideas also become clear. Repeated words or sentiments can be used as indicators of meaning. Therefore, keywords were noted as linguistic guides for indicating emergent themes. Keywords are also apparent by how often they are repeated as well as the notation of specific words or phrases different group members utilize when discussing the same or similar topics.

Each of the focus group queries functioned as a general category to begin analysis. As each question was examined, responses were constantly compared within and across the groups. Different colored pens and color-coded sticky-notes were used to separate each question and shorthand terms were used to label the responses to each question into a larger or related theme or category. Next, specific themes were examined for exclusivity, cohesiveness, and exhaustiveness. The researcher determined if there was overlap in the themes or determined them to be exclusive. This process required sticky-notes which were placed on a board and organized according to broader themes as they seemed to emerge from the data. Some themes appeared to be related, but were oppositional. These themes were categorized together as "dichotomous" themes.

Once the themes were determined, further examination of the text was required and exemplars for each theme were found. Based on the total number of participants,

FGIs, and transcribed texts, these interviews provided a large amount of data. The repetition of the themes described in Chapter Four suggest that saturation was achieved.

In total, the texts were read three times. The first read was an attempt to identify common themes that appeared in the texts. The second read was done in a critical sense to code or acknowledge these themes. Different colored pens were used to mark each of the units that represented a particular theme. Finally, each text was read an additional time to find exemplars and to confirm themes that may have been present. Also, at this time, additional text that was not marked previously was examined for any additional themes that were present. Each of the themes were then closely studied and outlined. Once the themes were identified, different categories were created for each group of themes. Once these categories were developed, claims were constructed about the nature of political talk among the different groups.

The particular procedures employed for data analysis is proper for this study for several reasons. First, the researcher is looking for new categories and themes for theory building which the literature has not fully explored. The type of open coding adopted here is required when the goal is to find an innovative coding system to produce typologies or theoretical models to be used in subsequent studies. Second, thematic analysis is important when a researcher wishes to find trends or commonalities within the data. This is particularly helpful with interview texts. Finally, open coding is consistent with the justificationist approach to data analysis—that data functions as raw material or evidence for claims to be made. It is particularly important for the researcher to adhere closely to what the citizens' responses were in the interviews.

Finally, an interactional analysis was performed using the same constant comparison method noted above. Specifically, the researcher examined the linguistic tools used, or conversational cues that were utilized by participants, to help determine an individual's mode of conversation and also indicate the interaction within groups. These cues were verbal in nature and evident in the transcribed text. This analysis looks more specifically at the conversational tools participants utilized (such as story telling, patterns of interruption, and disagreement) as separate data from the content used to create the themes as described above. Understanding these tools of interaction further illuminates the question of *how* individuals talk about politics.

In order to answer the first research question, how individuals describe their involvement in the political process, an analysis of the words and references that citizens used in their discussions is helpful. This analysis helps the researcher understand what linguistic structures (phenomena) citizens use to express their feelings towards the political process and their definition of that process. This question drew only upon phase two data as participants in that phase were specifically asked to react to "politics" as a word and a concept.

The first research question was informed by the thematic analysis as well as the second research question, "How do citizens from different age groups describe themselves and others involved in the political process?" This question is the largest in scope because it requires an understanding of the intersections between individual perceptions of their role in politics and their perceptions of *others'* roles in the political process. The thematic analysis elucidates the lines of this intersection and answers the second research question. This question is answered by utilizing both phase one and



phase two data since phase one produced the original discussions regarding generational differences that spurred the phase two data collection.

The final research question, “How do citizens engage in communication about the political process?” is best answered by the interactional analysis performed after the thematic analysis. Specifically, this question is aimed at the interaction between citizens in discussion. This element of their political talk is suggested by the conversational styles and manners they choose to use to talk about their experiences. The interactional analysis allows the researcher to focus on the linguistic tools that citizens use rather than just the content of their communicative acts. The researcher’s close involvement with *all* of the focus groups from the phase two data collection allowed for an interpretation of interaction within the groups. The researcher was not present for *all* of the focus groups in the phase one data collection and therefore was not provided with the opportunity to explore this research question in that analysis. Phase two data only was used to answer this particular question. The researcher was required to be present to adequately interpret the behavior and linguistic cues of the participants once the transcript texts were completed.

In light of the three research questions and the interpretivist approach adopted by this study, hermeneutical phenomenology allows the researcher the direction needed to organize and interpret the FGI data while allowing an openness for participants to define their lifeworld in terms of their political engagement. In adhering to the principles of this type of research, rich texts are produced from citizen participation in the group discussions. Furthermore, these methods of data collection and analysis follow the communicative engagement perspective and hermeneutical phenomenology. The

methods utilized in this study for data collection and analysis provide the best opportunity for understanding how different generations of citizens create their political selves.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Analysis

#### *Thematic Analysis*

In reading the texts, there were clear themes that emerged from the focus group interview transcripts. The words that individuals used to describe themselves as political entities as well as their stories and examples were analyzed in terms of their comparison to others in the group and across the groups. Once these themes were identified, the relationships between them were linked by the participants' responses and therefore were not separated from each other in the analysis. Participants indicated that they were either involved or uninvolved in the system; they talked about their ability and willingness to participate as well as their inability to participate in politics. In short, the themes that emerged were not one-sided or one-dimensional. Instead, the themes were linked to each other and this linkage was preserved in the analysis.

Once it became clear that the themes were related, further examination of the texts revealed that participants addressed these themes in terms of degrees, or as if on a continuum, rather than in opposition to each other. For example, some participants indicated that they felt the political system was more important while others indicated that it was less important; or some participants felt they could talk about politics while others felt that they could not talk about politics. To view these themes as just "system

importance” or “political talk” would diminish the depth of analysis instead of elucidating underlying differences in how participants developed these themes.

This linking of themes culminated in five continuums (dichotomous themes) including the **inside-versus outside the system** theme, the **action-versus-knowledge** theme, the **talk-versus-no talk** theme, the **communitarianism-versus-individualism** theme, and the **materialism-versus-post-materialism** theme. These dichotomies were discovered as the themes found in the first reading of the texts appeared to be related, yet the way the generational groups talked about each theme was different. It is readily apparent that while each group addresses similar issues, they attach themselves to these ideas in myriad ways. These dichotomous themes attempt to elucidate those differences. Ultimately, these dichotomous themes or continua resulted in a new way of looking at political involvement. The model developed from this study is the **Generational Identity Continuum (GIC)** (see Appendix D) and is built from the dichotomous themes described below.

In addition to finding themes in the content of the transcripts, notes during the data collection and transcription phase indicated that there were differences in how the groups interacted with each other. For example, the younger generations used different conversational styles than their older counterparts. These interactional differences are clear in two ways. First, how the different groups utilize narrative as a form of communication differed. The younger generations did not tell stories or had less developed narratives than the older groups. Second, styles of disagreement also differed. The younger groups were less likely to disagree with each other in their group interactions and when they did they often explained why they choose to disagree. These

interactional differences function at a different level of analysis based on the content of the transcripts, but such analysis illustrates how important political talk and conversation is to understanding the self in terms of the political system. In answering the RQs, the Third Person Effect phenomenon had some influence on the respondents as became clear in their responses. Therefore, all of the research questions are answered in light of TPE and its potential impact on the final conclusions. The final section of this chapter provides analysis of the focus group participants' patterns of interaction, responding specifically to RQ3.

In the following sections, the five dichotomous themes are first identified and defined. Next, focus group data is provided to help explain each theme with support drawn directly from the participants' responses. Finally, each theme is then interpreted in terms of its meaning and contribution to our understanding of citizens' political involvement across generations. Analysis of each theme is organized according to the three generational cohorts that make up this study, including young citizens, adults, and seniors. The interpretation of these themes is based on participant responses as a communicative phenomenon.

### Dichotomous Themes

#### *Inside-Versus-Outside the System*

The inside-versus-outside the system continuum is defined by two poles: 1) trust in how and to what degree the political system works; and 2) trust in individual actors or groups of people who are perceived to be outside of the political system. Faith or trust in the system is represented by citizens' responses which refer to traditional political involvement such as voting (particularly along party lines), campaigning, running for

office, or working for a major political party. Faith or trust in individuals refers to allegiance in third-party candidates, support of social movement activities that challenge the established political order, involvement in grassroots organizations, and local volunteerism.

### *Young Citizens*

Emotional reactions to the political process varied across all three generations, but only slightly. For younger generations, however, the overwhelming feeling about politics was negative. The young citizens seemed to react very strongly to the word politics, and were more likely than other generations to describe the political process in a negative light using such terms as “complicated,” “confusing,” “dirty,” “annoying,” “uninteresting” and “distasteful.” In fact, only two responses across all the young citizen responses suggested that politics is a positive activity, employing the terms “interesting” and “important.”

Within the young citizens’ discussions, as soon as the word “politics” was mentioned it appeared that most of the air was sucked out of the room. Groans of “Oh, no!” were sometimes heard as the opening line of the welcome statement informed the group that, “Today we will be discussing citizen participation and civic engagement in the political process.” Some students in the Missouri groups indicated that they were “saturated” or “bored with” politics because they were hearing about it in classes and on television. One female student said, “Oh no, not this again...haven’t we heard enough?” Despite their initial reactions, young citizens were still willing to talk about the political system—even for a limited amount of time.

For younger citizens, the inside-outside dichotomy is built around four subthemes: 1) lack of knowledge about the political system; 2) lack of impact on or from the system; 3) lack of system functionality, or the government's inability to work on citizen's behalf; and 4) alternative definitions of political participation. These four subthemes work together to construct the dichotomous theme of inside-versus-outside the political system.

One commonality that students shared was that they did not feel they knew enough about the political system to participate in it. This lack of knowledge leads to insecurity about decision making; but more importantly, it leads to disinterest in the system. One male student suggested that the problem with knowledge and the political system is the size of the system, "The big stuff, that no one really understands the full concept of, we don't get what makes things work the way that they [older citizens] do." In not understanding how things "work," young citizens do not feel the need or ability to be involved. One female concurred, "I just don't get it. I don't get politics." This lack of understanding is based partially on how young citizens view their own role in the system, "I just never cared, I guess I should, but I don't have time to understand it," said another female student. This disinterest in, or lack of understanding, the system may be due to size or lack of knowledge, but these young citizens do not feel that they know enough or care enough about the system to work within it.

Their lack of knowledge about the system may be related to the lack of influence that members of the younger generation feel they have on the system; or relatedly, that the system has very little effect on their personal lives. This lack of impact and feeling of helplessness runs two ways: one, the political system seems to have little effect on young

citizens' lives; also, young citizens feel they have little ability to affect the system. A male student noted that his generation has little chance to affect the government because it is influenced so heavily by money:

It's just a lot . . . a little less more of a democratic process; but if you, umm, don't have the bucks to play, you can't play, and uh, I think for that reason, our generation goes 'whew!' I don't really care cause that guys never gonna, uh, you know, know who I am, what I'm about. He's never going to personally touch my life.

This concept of the personal involvement of politicians with younger generations and vice versa was echoed by a female student who said, "I feel like, I mean, I think I should be voting, but I still don't really care. I mean, I care about issues that affect me, but either one of them being elected doesn't, I mean, not too much is going to change." The fact that young students feel like no change is possible through the system underscores their lack of interest in the system. If they do not understand the system and the system does nothing for them, then they simply "really don't care." Another male noted that this lack of efficacy dictates his entire generation's lack of interest:

You know, the established political parties don't want outsiders getting involved. For the same reasons that the Republicans, although demographically smaller than the Democrats, typically do as well or better, because it's a small dedicated group as opposed to a large blasé group. So being part of the process is not aimed towards X'ers.

If the process is not aimed towards the younger generation, then they will not involve themselves in the process of politics and therefore will exist outside of the system.



Additionally, as this young male is indicating, he feels that the system is specifically not geared towards younger generations. This quotation also hints at the third problem with young generations and the system: the system does not function for them.

Lack of functionality is defined as the inability of the system to work of behalf of citizens. This is mainly illustrated through the younger generations' interest and reliance upon third-party candidates or those who appear to challenge or work outside of the established political system but who still attempt to function within the political arena. One male reported that the two-party system is not only driven by money, but also keeps out potential candidates:

I don't know if it is possible for a person to have their own agenda. I mean, if you look at at the third party candidates, now they can barely get on the ballot let alone get elected. If you don't have millions of dollars behind you for nationally advertising campaigns, bulletin boards, etc. God know what else it takes.

What is most interesting in this young man's quotation, however, is the idea that individuals cannot function within the established system and somehow have their own ideas addressed by the system because of the money that is required to participate in politics. While it is clear that he is referring to candidate participation and not the general population, his sentiment suggests the system does not work for someone who does not want to attach themselves to the choices presented by the established political order.

The two-party system seemed to be a real point of interest for participants in the young citizens' groups. Specifically, these citizens focused on the inability of the two-party system to function for them or represent their interests. One male noted in 2000 that the power of the established party system effectively suppresses any potential

challenge from outside the established order, “That’s the thing though, [third-party candidates] assemble satellite parties and nobody really pays attention to them cause really whatever they do is not going to matter anyway.” This male was indicating that third-party options might actually increase political participation or interest. His thoughts were echoed by others, including a male in 2004:

The problem is, that since we only have two parties, they worry about not stepping out and looking too extreme and trying to please everybody and not actually getting anything done rather than actually do what they’re meant to do...it’s a proven fact that you get at least a 15% jump with proportional representation voting. People will have a better chance of a Green party or a liberal or an independent getting in there and getting office so they’re more likely to vote because more votes they get in there for the person they want, the more people are seated in Congress.

In this quotation, the young citizen outlines options for how the system could work differently while elucidating how the current system does not function. While this young man clearly has knowledge of the current political system, he describes how it does not function in a way that responds to citizens’ interests or allows candidates to “do what they’re meant to do.” Instead, the system does not work to represent the polity the way that it might.

Young citizens cited several examples which were specific to this problem of third-party candidates and the functionality of the current system. One young man talked about former Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean as a candidate that attempted to function somewhat “outside” of the system – even though Dean campaigned

as a Democrat. In the end, however, Dean was not successful because the system allows very little deviation from established order or expectations:

I think what made Dean so appealing was that his base was so liberal, that it really got him fired up; and now the issue is they want someone to beat Bush. I think the turnout just keeps dropping year after year because there is no difference between the parties and in other countries we see there are four or five main candidates, but here we have two.

In this quotation, it is clear that the two-party system pushed Dean out because they needed someone to beat the Republican rather than someone that expressed more liberal views. By doing this, according to this young man, choices are limited so people stop voting and participating. Ironically, four years later, Dean would be coopted by the Democratic party and become the Chair of the Democratic National Committee. Despite this, the perception that Dean first was outside of the system, or on the fringe of the two-party system, indicates that the young citizens viewed him as an outsider based on his political views.

Another example that another male student provided was Ralph Nadar of the Green party:

My brother has pretty strong views, last year, uh, he was in St. Louis [where debates were held] and he lobbied to . . . to get, umm the guy from the Green party last year? Nadar? Umm he lobbied to get him like in St. Louis and he came and there was a big campaign. My brother ended up going to jail for it. So it umm, was a pretty big deal, he got sprayed by the cops and stuff, stuff in his eyes

and like the sheriff, he's for Clark, Wes Clark. I don't know anything about him though.

Despite the obvious dislike of the sheriff, this male was indicating that third party candidates could not be within the system and that the system functions to deny non-main party candidates opportunities to be elected (or even participate in presidential debates). Wes Clark, in this case, was a major-party candidate (a Democrat) while Nadar was outside of the system. This story indicates that young citizens feel that the two-party system does not function in the way they would like. In fact, it limits choices in different ways and makes participation less likely.

The lack of knowledge about the system, the feeling of an inability to affect the system, and the consensus that the system does not function for young citizens are all reasons for why the younger generations do not place trust in the system or want to work within it. Consequently, young citizens define participation in multitudinous ways, most of which do not include traditional forms of political engagement. These alternative views of participation do not include such traditional forms of political participation as voting or campaigning, or working for one of the main political parties. Instead, young citizens look to activities outside of the two-party system to participate in, much like they advocate for the inclusion of third-party candidates.

The reason that young citizens choose these alternative activities may be because of their feelings towards the current system as described above, but also because they believe that individuals that directly touch their lives are most likely to be responsive to their interests and needs. One female citizen said:

But I do know it's like my uh, elementary teachers affected my life more than like the elected school board like directly affected me. So it's the people that aren't elected a lot of the time that make the difference.

This idea that unelected individuals make a difference while elected officials are not effectual is the main thrust of young citizens' lack of involvement in the established political system. If politics do not affect them and the system does not work for them, then young citizens turn to those who are effective: namely, individuals in their local community who make a difference in their lives.

One female student elucidated the different types of participation and the levels on which it occurs, particularly at this individual level:

And I could see where like participation is less than it was, but I also think participation is on a very different level. You know, we can sit at home and watch the debates and develop our opinion...we don't need to put the pins on and we don't need to go to the rallies to see the candidates speak and things like that, when you know, in the past they did that more. So I think participation isn't as high as it used to be, but I think it's changed a lot too, so maybe it does just look that way.

The idea that participation just *looks* like it is declining was discussed in previous chapters; but most importantly it is clear in this quotation that political involvement has become more personal to young citizens and is perhaps less visible to observers. This represents an important and alternative view to traditional notions of *civic engagement*. Civic engagement or political involvement were never considered to be "invisible" or personal behaviors because such activity is typically regarded as public or community

activities. However, in these discussions young citizens are describing a political involvement that is both personal and often invisible to others. Another female student concurred with this assessment:

I think because of like technology also it's made it . . . people are involved, it's less visible. Like, for example, e-mails and you know, there's just all sorts of ways of communicating and umm participation without really getting out of your house, you know. It's all personal.

Political involvement for the youth is to reject the traditional political system and to be invisible in their political engagement and make politics personal. In fact, technology has given young people – as well as all citizens – the tools to make the political personal and less community or action-based. A male from this same group of young citizens continued this idea of alternative participation:

I think getting involved in politics is as easy as reading a newspaper. Politics doesn't mean, I mean, you don't even have to be in a lobbying group . . . you don't have to be in some kind of . . . action group to actually be involved in politics. You simply knowing is half the battle, simply reading, catching up and being informed is the most important thing.

Again, such political involvement is invisible to the community. If reading a newspaper is involvement for younger citizens, then traditional political behaviors as voting and lobbying and “action group” participation are not necessary. Another young citizen explained that involving yourself in politics is extremely personal:

I think whenever you stand up for anything that you believe in at all, at any level, you are involving yourself in politics. If you see some injustice in the street and

you choose to voice that as a journalist or anything, umm I think you are involving yourself in politics.

According to this participant, being involved with the political is about the personal, and taking *any* kind of action is seen as *political* activity.

Other alternative forms of participation were also discussed by the young citizens. Aside from information gathering or responding to injustices encountered in one's everyday life, one female outlined other actions outside of the system:

Riots and stuff, that's all I hear. Rallies that just go crazy from presidential campaigns, political campaigns, like WTO and riot kinds of things...like a lot of those people that protest the war, sometimes they turn into riots.

This student seemed to be somewhat confused about what was considered typical political involvement, but apparently for her riots are common political action – whether these actions are part of the traditional system (campaigns) or serve as a challenge to the system (protesting the war, the WTO, etc.).

Finally, young citizens seem confused about the political system and how it works. This confusion, based on the complexity of the system, leads to feelings of inefficacy. “It is too complex,” one female stated; and another added, “I could care less, it won't matter anyway.” Young citizens are clear about their lack of interest in the traditional political system and are also clear that their own generation is different from other generations. In fact, one male made it clear that his parents and grandparents' generations did not focus on personal politics and was attached to the two-party system. He distinguished his generation from earlier generations:

[They] grew up in an era where you picked one side and crossed all Democratic, all Republican and you didn't really get involved with down to the personal, like the city level. You just kinda voted for president and you crossed off whichever party you support. Now that doesn't happen.

The change of definition of political involvement is clear. Over time, for young generations, politics has become personal, more local rather than national, and community oriented. Combined with their lack of knowledge about the political system, the system's inability to affect young citizens' lives, and the lack of system functionality, alternative forms of participation indicate that young generations work outside of the traditional political system. Therefore, young citizens fall on the "outside-the-system" end of the "inside-versus-outside the system" continuum. This pattern differs, however, from adult and senior generations who have more affinity for working within the political system.

### *Adults*

The adult groups were less likely to be cynical about the political process or traditional system, but still reacted somewhat negatively to the topic of politics. While adults expressed feelings towards the political process that included more positive responses, their negative responses were still clearly more prevalent. These expressions included such descriptors as "dirty," "confusing," "corrupt," "scary" and "dislike." The positive responses, however, suggested that adult groups found the political process slightly more relevant to their lives as descriptors like "powerful," "important," "necessary" and "fascinating" were also used. But when talking about the political system, adults wavered between the necessity of the system and the desire to work



outside of it. In short, adults seemed to question the system, while still working within it. Adult groups were more likely to accept the system the way it currently functions, while hoping the system will address their interests and needs. In general, while adult citizens expressed some skepticism toward political party allegiance, their actions were typically expressed within the traditional two-party system.

Three key ideas represent the adult citizens' views of working inside-versus-outside of the political system. First, adults believe that the system is still working and that individuals should involve themselves in this political structure. Second, adults place importance on the act of voting. Finally, adults focus their political attention particularly on the federal and community levels, rather than the personal political sphere as expressed by young citizens.

Indications that the political system is working are clear to the adult citizens. One reason for the system's continued viability is due to political media availability, as one adult male in 2004 noted:

The people who are political[ly] active now, I think, are much more politically active than they were back in the 60s or whatever because they have a lot more tools at their disposal with Internet and the ability to publish their own alternative media and things like that, so they have a lot more opportunity. But on the flip side of that, the people that, there is a kind of uhh, I don't know, apathy, and it's very prevalent among students I think.

This acknowledgement of both involvement and apathy is an important distinction for the adults because it also seems to reflect how they feel about the political system and their

position when considering operating from within or outside of the established system. A female adult in 2004 expresses this uncertainty:

I think that's an unforeseen factor when people see third-party candidates and they're like 'it's gonna steal votes from another candidate.' I think what's really happening is people say, 'oh here's somebody different that I could vote for,' you know? And otherwise they wouldn't vote at all because what's the difference between these two guys?

The adult citizens appear to waiver much more across the spectrum between individuals who support and are involved in the traditional political system and those that acknowledge the value of operating outside the system. Unlike their younger counterparts, the adult groups would clearly question the system, they seem to know much more about how the system works, yet they were more willing to participate within the system while still expressing a lack of efficacy or ability to affect the system.

Support for the political system, however, is still engrained in the talk of the adult citizens. "Well, you have no right to complain if you do not vote." This phrase, or some variation of it, was common throughout both the adult and senior discussions in 2000 and 2004. Yet young citizens, even when they acknowledged voting is important, did not indicate that voting was a threshold activity for further political expression. For adult citizens, however, the vote is a central part of the political process, whether one votes along party lines or not. As one female noted in 2004:

I work with someone who's the party line, who's the same age as me; and this person seems to feel very justified in voting a certain way because it's a long standing tradition in their family. This amazes me.

Adults may vote party lines or against them, but they do feel that voting is important.

Another person in that group responded, indicating that his parents voted out of habit and along party lines:

I think my parents are more [voters] of habit. They tend to follow along the [party] lines. I think I'm a questioner of authority, and a lot of us are; but I don't necessarily buy into one thing. I'm more skeptical than of any particular hard-nosed party line.

These quotations exemplify the teeter-totter indecisiveness of the adult generation: to vote or not is not the question, how to come to conclusions about how to vote differs greatly, however. In either case, voting is an important part of the political system and for many adults their vote is an indication of their allegiance to the established political system or a critique of it.

Even when the adult citizens would discuss the possibility of changing the current political system, there was still some feeling of inevitability that one could only be politically engaged by functioning within the established political order. As an adult male in 2000 proclaimed, "I don't put a whole lot of faith in anything, it's gotta be proven. Maybe there's some hope for change, but how could anyone change anything now?" Another adult male responded, "If you don't question and just vote the party line, then you just stick to it."

For the adult citizens, party allegiance is not nearly as important as voting and participating in the system. Also, while these adults expressed some desire for system change, they were more insistent on being engaged in the current political system and felt that any eventual change could only come through their act of voting – whether for a

major-party candidate or, for some, voting for a third-party or independent candidate.

This focus on the system and how it works is indicative of the general sentiment of the adult groups. They still attach themselves to the current political order through the act of voting.

When discussion about younger citizens' apathy was introduced, the adult groups, always optimistic, suggested that schools are becoming better about requiring students to become politically involved. One female adult stated that she witnessed high school students who were required to volunteer become interested in being more active because of their service experience. However, it was noted reluctantly that this requirement to be involved in volunteer activities through the education system is not universal and, in fact, appears to be currently a less frequent part of the curriculum.

### *Seniors*

Seniors, unlike their counterparts, had few emotional reactions to the general notion of "politics" because they mainly focused their discussions on the process of politics rather than their feelings toward politics. Also, unlike younger and adult citizens, the senior groups did not entertain notions of third-party candidates or other "outside the system" activities too often. Instead, they indicated that two things were most important for the political process: party affiliation and voting. Most seniors who participated in the 2004 focus groups mentioned that they did not always take the party line, but more often than not, they did. One female mentioned, "I would vote for the other party if there was no one running on my side." This is important because this female indicated that the act of voting would be more important to her than even party allegiance. In addition, this also shows the strong attachment of the senior groups to the traditional political system.

Instead of finding alternative forms of participation, or considering a different kind of system (i.e., a multi-party system), seniors would simply vote for whomever was available.

The act of voting is a sacred act to older generations, and therefore voting is essential whether there is competition or not; and voting the party line is not necessarily bad. One male said quite clearly, “Sure there may be no good politicians, but ya gotta vote for somebody!” Voting for seniors is important, but the few that think voting is not important still vote the party line. More importantly, when seniors do not vote they indicate that they are not involved in politics at all, as opposed to other generations which still claim to be involved even if they do not vote. Seniors’ faith in the system, or their attachment to the two-party political system through their vote, is clear and also suggests that alternative forms of participation are not a consideration for seniors. Finally, the larger picture drawn from these examples indicates that individual action is not nearly as important as the communal act of voting. This importance placed on their vote is evident as one senior male compared his generation to younger generations, “I think if it [voting] was talked about they would appreciate what their grandparents went through and you know, where they are right now.” This male was talking about how voting rights have changed over time to now include universal adult suffrage – a result of women and minorities struggling to gain the vote. A perceived lack of appreciation by younger generations for the voting rights they now enjoy was noted in the senior groups.

Older citizens also agree that younger citizens are not taught enough “at home and school” about civics and political matters. One adult male concluded, “Look at the schools, I do not think they even teach this stuff anymore.” And a female senior group

member explained that while she was teaching in high schools things changed over time and civics courses did not teach the political system as something to be involved in, but rather as something to be learned about in the classroom. Even when talking about younger generations, senior participants were clear that the younger generations' apathy may not be entirely their fault – they just have not learned *how* to be involved. In fact, this same sentiment was expressed by all three generational groups.

While all three generational groups talked about the political system in terms of voting, political parties and participation, they differed in how they felt about the importance of the political system. It is clear that the younger generations feel less involved and less a part of the traditional political system and they place themselves outside of this structure. Adults, however, lie in between, wavering between being involved in the traditional political system while attempting to work outside of the system as well. Finally, seniors are firmly attached to the traditional political system and the way that it currently functions.

#### *Action Versus Knowledge*

The system involvement theme described above is connected to and partially supported by the notion of political action versus political knowledge. Young citizens often feel that they lack political knowledge but that by gaining knowledge they are sufficiently involved. Adults believe that political involvement requires specific actions or behaviors based on knowledge about politics. Seniors clearly believe that political action is more important than knowledge. This dichotomy of action versus knowledge is consistent with the three generational groups' attachment, or lack thereof, to the political system.

*Young Citizens*

Three main ideas seemed to fall into the “action versus knowledge” theme for the young citizens. They believe that gaining knowledge *is* political involvement. Young citizens also believe that technology makes their involvement less visible while still helping them gain political knowledge. Finally, young citizens believe that watching the news is sufficient political engagement. In short, political action equals knowledge acquisition.

The young citizens mentioned different ways they can find information, particularly through the Internet, but also through television and newspapers. This information gaining seems to “hide” their political involvement, or make it more of an individual activity—a belief in direct opposition to older generations who indicate that political action is communal and public. One female student mentioned this political invisibility in 2004, “I think it’s because of technology, people are involved, it’s less visible because like for example emails and you know, there’s just all sorts of ways of communicating and ummm participating without really getting out of your house, you know?” Another male student added:

I think getting involved in politics is as easy as reading a newspaper. Politics doesn't mean, I mean, you don't even have to be in a lobbying group, you don't have to be in some type of . . . any type of action group to actually be involved in politics. You simply knowing is half the battle, simply reading and catching up and being informed is the most important thing.

The idea that political involvement is individual and not a community action, or that gaining knowledge is enough of an action to be engaged politically is unique to the young citizen groups.

In seeming contradiction to this statement, however, students in both 2000 and 2004 did mention that not voting would be “stupid.” Although they recognize that political involvement can occur in many different ways, they still acknowledged the importance of voting as political action. Nonetheless, they still consider activities unrelated to voting to be political action, and therefore view themselves as “engaged citizens” when they are “merely watching Fox News” as one male explained in 2004. While not voting is “stupid,” it is also not a requirement to consider someone active in politics.

Finally, young citizens indicated that they did not have time to do much more than become informed. Some participants suggested that their parents and grandparents “have more time” to vote and be involved politically. One young female said, “They have nothing better to do. I do.” This excuse of not having time or not placing much of a priority on political participation is something the older generations acknowledged is true for young citizens. Adults indicated that they would like to see younger citizens make



participation a priority while the senior groups actually seemed to accept the younger citizens' explanation of being too busy to be engaged in politics.

*Adults*

Adult groups had a slightly different view of action versus knowledge. While they were more likely to be cynical about politics, they still encouraged participation in the process in the form of traditional political action. Adults describe fighting for legislation, local and community action, and voting as keys to involvement. Several examples and narratives were provided of different local action adults had been involved in at some point in their lives. One male explained how he and several others joined together to attempt to stop the expansion of a highway in their neighborhood in 2004:

We had an interesting case in our neighborhood where a church that owned a lot of property, umm, in this very quiet residential neighborhood decided that they would sell half of it and use the other, use the income for expanding the church, but they were gonna sell half of it to a . . . a day care which would increase the traffic and that kind of thing. So the issue was that the neighborhood didn't want the traffic there, but the church had a lot of political power in the community and so this became a political debate in city hall about the neighborhood versus the church...and it ended up at the umm . . . a law it was intended to prevent X-rated businesses from being in neighborhoods was used to prevent the church from getting a rezoning to do that...but at that point brought the people in that community really to a point of action either on one side or the other.

Another adult female mentioned that "not shopping at Wal-Mart" was a political activity for her and another mentioned that "riding a bike instead of using fuel in a car" was a

central part of her political action. But the adult groups still held on tightly to the vote as part of their political action. As stated before, they agreed that if you do not vote, you are not permitted to complain. Adults groups did not, however, mention gaining knowledge as a form of political action. They did feel that knowledge was important to being politically involved, but only when such knowledge was related to some type of activity which affected their community.

*Seniors*

Senior participants believed that voting is important, that campaigning might also be a key part of political involvement, that local community work is necessary, and that knowledge is not enough by itself to be politically active. One male senior group member stated, “It is a responsibility, you *have* to [vote].” Another senior male made the distinction between knowledge gaining and action, “[I agree with] what you said earlier about people falling in love with their television until all of a sudden you realize you have been changed by policy. You have to get involved instead of just following things day-to-day.” If adults believe that the system still works, then involvement in that system is also key, “You can complain, just vote!” said one senior female.

All senior groups agreed that voting is essential and important and a citizen’s duty. However, action for seniors also occurred on a local level. One female tells the story of collecting tires for a local company to send on for recycling during the war effort, “We would go around, uh, and collect tires and things for recycling when we were not working. Keep things going.” A male explained that although he never ran for any particular office, he was always campaigning for someone else:

Male: “I liked campaigning. Hand out flyers at the polls. Phone calls.”

Moderator: “Did you run?”

Male: “No, no, never ran, would work for others though.”

Local politics or civic engagement seemed an important activity to seniors because, in the past, the world was not quite so connected globally. In fact, some seniors defined “political” activity rather narrowly, not including various forms of local or community engagement. As a senior male in 2004 explained:

I did church work most of the time. My wife and I got to go to 23 international conventions and I was treasurer and spent seven years on the board. We spent vacation time with the kids and when I was home I was encouraged to be involved with different organizations. I was working with her for fifteen years, a long time. I was in the American Legion, the military, and I was president of the Booster club, so that’s the way I spent my time. My wife and I were involved in local things, so there was no time for politics.

Once this male explained these activities, the moderator asked him if this kind of involvement would be considered political, and he simply answered, “no.” No other seniors stepped in to suggest that these activities were at all political in nature. For seniors, in the end, their political involvement was largely defined by voting.

When talking about the younger generations’ lack of participation, seniors seemed sympathetic. As indicated above, most seniors acknowledged that younger citizens have more opportunities than they did, but they also have to work harder for those opportunities. This limits young citizens’ time to be politically active. One senior male in 2004 said, “Two income families? That wasn’t necessary before.” The ability to be involved politically or in one’s community is now limited by a lack of time. “Back then

you went to PTAs and school board meetings; two-job families don't have time for that," said one male senior participant. In fact, there was a certain amount of forgiveness for younger citizens' perceived apathy from the senior groups. Unlike the adult groups, seniors understood that young citizens are more active today and acknowledged the inability of younger generations to participate in the same ways they had.

*Talk Versus No-talk*

The long-held idea that talking about religion and politics in public is taboo seems to still hold true – even for participants in focus groups designed to talk about politics. When participants were asked to talk about politics, their reactions were often negative. Some participants were explicit in their desire to not talk about politics. However, when the conversations in the groups were going on, discussions often turned to the topic of participants' reluctance to engage in political talk with others.

If these groups are any indication, political talk with others is essential to learning about politics, yet focus group participants expressed varying levels of (dis)comfort when talking about their political discussions. In general, all three groups seemed relatively uncomfortable with talking about politics for various reasons. However, the level of import placed on political conversation did vary as did who the participants reported talking about politics with – and with whom they specifically avoided discussing politics.

*Young Citizens*

Young citizens admitted to talking very infrequently about politics with family members, but acknowledged some discussion with their peers. Two main ideas made up these themes. First, while young citizens did not want to talk about politics with their families, they felt more comfortable talking about politics – in a limited manner – with

their peers. Second, even though young citizens felt political involvement was exercised through knowledge acquisition, they were not likely to talk about their political knowledge with others. One student in 2004 described the type of political talk that young citizens *could* take part in:

I know the RNC has a program that you can sign up and it's called Teen Leader. You can sign up five other people like you and get them to just register to vote, to just get them out...and then after that, kinda build on it, network, email and stuff, start session groups like chat rooms and everything to get out a candidate's message or this issue or that issue.

Another male student also noted that political discussion *could* be an important activity: "...just like she said, just being in discussion and relating to people's values." Finally, these young citizens also noted that in their families political talk or interest might skip a generation, "I know in my family that my grandfather was really involved, but my parents aren't. I guess I am somewhat."

While young citizens acknowledged that political discussions with others can be an important behavior, they were unable to give specific instances of their actual political talk – either with their peers or with their families – as the examples they generated of political talk was most often hypothetical instances of when and how one *might* engage in talk with others. It is notable here, as well, to point out that the young citizens' transcripts were much shorter than the adult groups' discussions when responding to questions regarding political talk. This textual evidence indicates that a lack of conversation about politics was definitive of young citizens.

*Adults*

Adult groups had mixed responses about talking to their parents about politics; but, interestingly, adults emphasized the importance of talking to their children. Again, two main ideas fed this particular theme. Adults felt that while they try to talk to their children about politics, their efforts are relatively unsuccessful. Second, adults indicated that there was no useful forum or opportunity to talk with others about politics. Thus, while young citizens often think that they do not have sufficient knowledge to talk about politics, their parents do not feel they have the opportunity.

One parent said of their children in 2004, “I’ve tried. I try and talk to them any way I can, I try to influence them any way I can.” But a female parent acknowledged this as a fruitless effort, “I still think it’s until it affects them they’re not going to [talk about politics] and it doesn’t happen. I don’t think when I was that age anyone could have said anything about anything I didn’t want to get involved in, whatever it was.”

Several adults indicated the need for more political forums for dialogue. One male stated, “We need dialogue, the problem is we are oppressed, there is nowhere to talk about it.” When it came to their children, adults claimed to be proactive in attempting to talk about politics; however, among their peers or in social settings, political talk for adults occurred infrequently. Nonetheless, adults saw political talk as an important part of the process. One participant stated that political talk might increase interest, but that sometimes in today’s society there was not opportunity for the expression of one’s opinion, “Except in situations like this [the focus group], we can’t share, we can’t talk at work, we could get fired or in trouble.”

This prohibited practice of political speech is consistent with the previously mentioned taboo nature of political talk, but such prohibitions appear to cause distress for

the adult citizens. If political talk is important to them, as these citizens claim, then there needs to be more opportunities for such expressions. Interestingly, on this question the adult group transcripts were the longest, suggesting the adults craved a forum for political discussion and the FGI provided this opportunity.

### *Seniors*

Seniors, on the other hand, could not recall talking to their children or their grandchildren about politics. Politics was also not something you talked about across party lines. One male said, “I was in Kiwanis and the Legion, and sometimes we would talk. But I didn’t do that at home.” Likewise, some seniors acknowledged that they did not even know if their children or grandchildren were politically involved. One female did admit, however, “When I need to vote, I call my daughter in Iowa and ask her who she is voting for.” Even when seniors talk about politics, they do so only in private settings or in places where it seems safe. However, over time, these settings have changed. While Kiwanis clubs or civic groups of this nature may have at one time provided forums for political conversation for these seniors, such opportunities are no longer available to these citizens. And conversation at home also rarely takes place. In short, for seniors, their political conversations are at best limited.

### *Summary*

All three generations suggested that in their daily lives there is a lack of political conversation with family members, peers, and the public in general. Several students argued that an interest in politics skipped their parent’s generation. Seniors suggested that the problem begins with younger people not “eating together at the table” and having family discussions. Seniors blame the family, the adults blame the schools, and the

young citizens simply acknowledge that they do not take the time to become informed and discuss politics.

### *Communitarianism Versus Individualism*

Communitarianism is generally regarded as a legal term used to describe a perspective that places the welfare of the community above the welfare of individuals. Individualism is the term typically used to refer to the opposite view. These terms were chosen specifically for this study because of the many expressions made in the FGI's that articulated a philosophy of concern for the well-being of the community versus expressions relating to the interests or needs of the individual. This dichotomy was evident through participants' descriptions of how they saw themselves in relationship to the political system. The younger participants were much more likely to place themselves *before* the welfare of the community, with their actions driven largely by their individual interests, needs and lifestyles rather than an interest in community participation. Senior groups were more likely to consider the community as a necessary conduit for political involvement. The adults indicated that they were somewhere between these two poles.

### *Young Citizens*

The emergence of this theme is not surprising considering previously cited literature about the individualistic nature of younger generations. What is interesting, however, is how individualism appears in the language of all the generational groups. Young citizens constructed four important perspectives that illustrate their placement on the communitarianism versus individualism continuum. First, young citizens are interested in extremely local issues that affect them personally (for example, their school



politics). Second, young individuals are interested in daily life activities and their own future rather than possible future changes in society. Third, younger generations are interested in individual values, defined specifically as their own values. Finally, when young citizens talk about politics, they more commonly refer to their friends' involvement and how *others* are involved, almost always on the local level.

Young citizens were very clear that they often find themselves involved in school politics both at the high school and collegiate level. "I ran for student government president in high school, does that count?" asked one female in 2004. Young citizens from the various student groups, both in 2000 and 2004, seemed to discuss high school politics and some university politics as part of their political experience. In addition to these examples, some indicated that they "followed" local politics that involved their school boards, local judges, and "major" events in their community such as the following extended example that involved a doctor who was sued for malpractice:

I talked recently about politics with my parents because, um, this is kind of getting back to the small town, I'm from a small town also, is in Madison County Illinois, which has lately been in the news because of the bad malpractice insurance things and uh, the judge who's been elected. I guess it's whatever the judge is for the court circuit judge, I don't know the terms, but umm, he's just been elected continually because he's kind of an old name in my town and he's the one who made the malpractice really bad in our county to one of the worst in the whole nation and my dad is a physician so this affects us personally. So kind of like the corruptness and he's got a very established name in town, is a

respected person and he did this and it brought up a lot of controversy to our town.

This story was particularly interesting because the young citizen was establishing that she knew little about politics, and yet the little knowledge she did possess focuses on a matter that affects her family personally. The example illustrates what most young citizens suggested in their description of their often limited political involvement: If it does not affect them, then it is not of interest to them.

Young citizens' knowledge about national politics was also limited, as a male student in 2004 explained:

I talked about politics this weekend with my mom because we were talking about the primaries, and uh, we always end up talking about the ads that we see because I don't keep up with it, um, very well and my mom does; but since I only know about the ads, we talk about those. Uh, just kind of the way we both hate to see you know a full commercial talking about how bad someone they are running against is. So that is the gist of our political conversation.

While these narratives indicate some level of political involvement through talk and knowledge, it is important to acknowledge that young citizens reminded the researcher constantly of their lack of knowledge. They also indicated that their conversations about politics centers around their own personal sphere of knowledge and experience.

Daily life activities were cited by young citizens as a way to illustrate their political involvement. One female in 2000 indicated that belonging to local groups was a form of political participation, "Just by supporting groups that . . . like if the candidate was a big supporter of let's say pro-choice, then by being a member of a pro-choice

organization, you are inadvertently supporting the candidate.” “It’s [just like] day-to-day in your general life being involved in the community or uh, like schools and just general things to benefit the public.” This vague idea of political involvement being a “daily activity” sounds like a description of a politically active group, yet again this young citizen was describing hypothetical political actions.

Young citizens are often contradictory when they describe their political involvement and define it for all citizens. First, they claim that watching the news (a private activity) is political involvement and that they watch the news as their primary form of political activity. Second, they claim that any community action (a public activity) is also political involvement but on this front they claim they are not politically involved. Therefore, it is unclear whether political involvement for these citizens is based on *public* or *individual private* action – or if it is both. In any instance, what is clear is that young citizens are not active politically (beyond their claims of news monitoring and consumption).

Young citizens mentioned that “values” play a role in their political involvement and they define political action in terms of these values. A female group member defined political involvement in 2004 as, “Anything that promoted your values. Promoting values is big because it allows individual people to live so that they’re benefiting society; and community service programs I guess would also be an extension of your values and ultimately benefit communities, and also churches.” This idea of “value promotion” seems like a communitarian ideal on its face, but the focus here again is on the individual’s values and the reason for political involvement is to promote an “extension

of your values” and not necessarily involvement for the betterment of the community.

Another young citizen added:

Well, ummm you know about the whole thing about how they took down all the confederate flags from all the landmarks and stuff. Well I don't like the confederate flag, but when we went down to the capitol, ummm, they were all lobbying to have them put back and I think that's right.

Again, this is an example of personal values that become a part of a larger perspective or political action. However, this participant was describing *other* citizens' political actions. The focus here is on the personal values of the participant, and the example of action or of community involvement is that of other citizens. This indicates that while young citizens are interested in their own values, they are often apathetic about acting on their personal values or interests.

The way that young citizens talk about political involvement is telling. These young citizens often shared stories of other friends who were involved or who wanted to be president, or perhaps govern a state. In fact, the greatest level of political action or involvement described by the young citizens was that of their peers. One female said, “A guy in my dorm goes around saying he will be president. He is like campaigning!” Further evidence of other's involvement, rather than one's own political engagement, was indicated earlier when it was noted that young participants tended to talk about their peers' experiences rather than their own experiences. Some students also described local community involvement – especially the involvement of others:

I have friends that go here and work for specific candidates and campaigns. They have locally, too . . . try and help. [They are involved] in helping the schools out,

but they also get out and do things for the community, like they do things that try and bring people up to the same level so everyone can be involved.

This community involvement, again, is local and limited to other citizens' experiences, not the participants'.

These statements, combined with earlier statements about different forms of involvement, reflect a recognition on the part of young citizens that political involvement is necessary. However, this expressed, often hypothetical, involvement seems counterintuitive to their comments about “finding information” or “just reading the newspaper” as their primary forms of political engagement. Young citizens seem to acknowledge that community action is important, but their examples of community engagement are usually motivated by a certain sense of self-involvement or interest. Students also perceive their parents are as uninvolved in community affairs as they are. As discussed later, this perception is in line with other generations' impressions of youth.

Nonetheless, the discussions do not suggest that younger generations do not involve themselves at all in community affairs, yet they do suggest that young citizens' involvement is focused on their personal ideals or values. Their community interest is combined with an individualistic attitude. While they are interested in the community, they focus on individual actions.

### *Adults*

Adult groups, not surprisingly, expressed an interest in communities working together. Their level of involvement — from school boards to PTAs to lobbying groups — makes it clear that their actions are commonly geared towards community involvement. Adults articulated four different perspectives that support their more

communitarian point of view. First, adults believe that political campaign work is important, “like stuffing envelopes for a campaign” one female said. They also express a concern for the lack of communitarian views, “The thing is, back then, there were communities. They didn’t have to travel far, almost stayed in the community...we don’t have communities anymore.” The adult citizens believe that the community is important and, finally, they believe that younger generations focus largely on the individual and not what is best for the community.

One adult male said, “People in college say ‘I’m in college’ and they move on. What I’m saying is that people have enclosed themselves so much and they get on the Internet.” The youth’s proclivity for “sitting in their room and watching a debate” is not considered involvement according to the older generations. While the younger generation views the Internet as a way to be involved, this adult male clearly felt that the Internet was a way to close off individuals from community participation.

One patient male felt that the youth will change, “I think part of it is, if you get married and all of a sudden, ‘holy cow!’ It matters what this community is, you know?” This male went on to explain that getting involved in the community does not become important until support from that community is needed; and younger citizens may not understand this need for community connection until they are older.

Other adult members were not quite as optimistic, as one male said, “I don’t think it’s cross generations, it’s getting worse and worse and worse.” A female participant added to that, “Oh, it is getting worse, but I also think people are getting, there are a lot more people it seems to me like a lot of the younger generation are a little more self-

involved.” This self-involvement and focus on individual action is what adult groups hope to avoid for the betterment of community.

The adult groups do admit, however, that political involvement and community involvement are necessary components that work together, “I’ve been involved in the communities before and in politics. And to me, umm, they sort of go hand in hand because any community, to have involvement, you had to depend on some, at some level, even if it’s a very low commitment, from the politicians.” The adult groups felt that being involved in the community is necessary action for political involvement. The adult groups’ definition of political involvement is clearly different from their younger counterparts.

This change in definition is illustrated in a commentary on youth involvement offered by an adult participant, “Just recently I’ve had talks with kids in their twenties and they seem very ummm, well, informed about some political issues and social issues and I was thinking they seem active again, although some of them are active, and some of them are discouraged.” But this knowledge and involvement is interpreted with a certain sense of skepticism as well:

These [younger generations] always think ‘I’m selling myself’, particularly because more and more with grade inflation and there are fewer things that way that can distinguish students in the eyes of admissions committees and employers and things like that. So, I have to see that trend, that’s probably where I see it going.

This adult citizen was commenting particularly on young citizens’ possible motivations for their public service or community involvement as a way to better their chances for

college admissions or employment opportunities. In response to this interpretation, another adult participant concluded, “I think people, and students, I actually think people in general, need to feel like they make a difference, like it makes a difference in some way, a big difference, new school or even a smaller difference—cleaner streets.” This observation produced general agreement among this particular adult group that community action, even when motivated by potential personal gain, may help younger generations seem more involved and create a sense of efficacy.

Overall, however, adult groups were pessimistic about community deterioration and the lack of younger generations’ community involvement. Because adults feel that communities are disappearing, but are necessary for political action, their views on the role of community action in the political process oscillated between wanting to be involved in their communities and needing to motivate younger citizens to act.

### *Seniors*

Senior groups tied their community involvement and activity to church groups, local community groups (such as the Legion or VFW), and local politics. Much like the adult groups, seniors felt that community action is key to political involvement. Seniors also mentioned the civil rights movement and shared stories about how they became active in those movements when they were young; but seniors felt that younger citizens today seem to be involved primarily in matters relating to their personal lives. Community affairs for younger citizens have become less important. Yet, seniors were again rather quick to offer an explanation for young citizens’ lack of community interest. As a senior male explained, “How do they have time? Going to school and working 20 hours a week to support a car? Which was out of the question for us, no one had cars in



college in that time.” The general consensus in the senior groups is that younger generations simply do not have the time for community involvement. A female senior concluded, “I think, a point, for whatever reason, they . . . you know, they work harder than us and work more jobs than we had to work.”

*Summary*

In terms of community involvement versus individual interests, the differences between generations are evident. The younger generations have their excuse for not being involved in community – “we are too busy with our own lives.” And the older generations are more attached to the system, but that does not explain why people do not necessarily vote. Reasons for lack of involvement are interesting, but perhaps more interesting is that seniors still find civic duty important while younger generations find individual involvement important. Each group defines civic engagement in terms of their individual action or public/community action. This move towards a more individualistic mentality redefined political involvement from a public to a private act and this redefinition means that younger citizens are less like to be involved than their older counterparts.

*Materialism Versus Post-materialism*

Inglehart (2000) describes the different values that a post-modernistic society focuses on rather than a modernistic society. A post-modernistic society is more interested in post-materialistic values. As described in previous chapters, post-materialistic values are not based on one’s need for security or basic needs such as food and shelter. Instead, higher order needs, such as lifestyle choices, the arts, and self-actualization are at the forefront of post-materialistic values. A materialistic society is

similar to the United States in the 1930's during the Depression era, and in the years that followed when citizens often needed help from their neighbors and the government to obtain food, shelter and energy sources. In a post-materialistic United States, a focus is placed on lifestyle choices, individual freedoms, preserving the arts, and also equality issues. If Inglehart is correct about these societal value shifts, and if Putnam (2000) is correct that *when we are young* is more important to our political involvement later in life, then the younger generations' discussions should reflect such post-materialistic "higher order" values and senior groups might reflect on more basic needs and values (those materialistic values instilled during their formative years). Additionally, a shift to post-materialistic values would also promote less of a reliance on communities and governments and therefore induce less political involvement among younger citizens.

#### *Young Citizens*

Indeed, in their discussions young citizens expressed a particular interest in post-materialistic values. Three main points are important to this dichotomous theme as it relates to the youth generation. First, young citizens outline some of the post-materialistic values that define their political involvement, and in doing so rely heavily on the value of higher education. Second, politics is seen as "old" to young citizens and materialistic values are often described as outdated. Finally, young citizens do not see a clear link between post-materialistic values and governmental processes. In general, younger citizens do not see the necessity of political involvement as their post-materialistic (individualistic) values have become more prominent.

One female student explained that her main interest was in education—a higher order value that allows one to achieve personal success:

My elementary teacher and teachers have affected my life more than like the elected school board, like directly affected. And umm, this might be a little biased because both of my parents are teachers; but just all the times that teachers stayed after class to help me and they do that like without pay and pay cuts and stuff like that. So it's the people that aren't elected a lot of the time that makes the difference.

In this observation it is clear that younger citizens are interested in issues that affect the success of their every-day lives rather than community values or concerns. Another female also indicated that political issues typically reflect past concerns rather than issues of present interest, "Well, whenever I think of politics, I think of the black-and-white TV times, I don't...I know that sounds really ditzzy, I'm sorry." In fact, younger citizens often apologized for their lack of knowledge or interest in politics, and did not seem to find politics to be particularly important to them or at all relevant to contemporary issues. A male student's attempt to describe relevant political issues of today illustrates this lack of knowledge:

I don't know, uh, you know, the programs for freedom . . . something like that . . . and how you can't pray in school or . . . I mean, I don't know. Societies gotta change, that's how it goes. There are going to be fewer and fewer black and white areas between the liberals and conservatives.

This lack of black and white areas — a politics of ambiguity and uncertainty — seemed to contribute to young citizens' lack of political understanding and interest. It was clear throughout the young citizens' discussions that they were unsure of political issues or how politics was or could be relevant to their lives. This is partially because materialistic

values such as shelter, food, and security are clear cut—either they are present or they are not. However, post-materialistic values are more vague or multidimensional. Young citizens do not know how to participate in a two-party system when multi-dimensional issues are at stake such as post-materialistic values. For example, basic needs such as food and shelter are fairly easily determined—either a citizen feels they have enough, or they feel that they do not. Abortion, on the other hand, is not so clear cut and is a choice, or a higher order value. While in the past citizens could argue that they were Democrat or Republican based on whether they felt safe, secure, or had shelter and food, now citizens with higher order values cannot break these interests and needs down into clear-cut, one-side-or-another political issues. If, for further example, an individual is pro-life—a typically Republican position—but also likes the Democrat’s position on increased education funding rather than the Republican’s position, then trying to find a party and candidate that addresses both of these issue preferences (both post-materialistic values) could be difficult. Multi-dimensional value preferences, such as freedoms and choice in lifestyle or social policy, make black and white distinctions between the two parties more complicated, which in turn makes choices in voting more complex for younger citizens.

Another common theme reflecting young citizens’ post-materialistic political philosophy was that these students felt that government actions and policies had no bearing on their personal lives or needs. One young male student explained why his grandfather remains involved in the system and in doing so this young citizen focuses on one’s personal stake for being politically involved. It is of note that this is the young citizen’s interpretation of what his grandfather *might or might not* intend. Still, he uses

his own perspective of a self-serving reason for being politically involved. In short, this citizen's grandfather is involved in politics for his own personal needs, not for community improvement:

I don't really get involved...I had a grandfather that is involved because he has stocks and stuff and the economics of it; but the only reason he gets involved is because he has a lot of money tied up in stocks and different companies and uh, he...he owns a few businesses and the only reason he does it is because it affects him financially.

A female pointed out, "It's not personal anymore. The government is big and complex and too big for it to affect us. Bills [legislation] and stuff won't affect us." This "less personal government" is just not necessary to the lives of the individualistic, post-materialistic citizen.

As noted in the earlier example, the current political system also seems to breed a blurring of the traditional distinctions between Democrat and Republican, which seems to make it even more difficult for younger citizens to get involved politically. As post-materialistic values fall into the "gray areas" of politics, these younger citizens seem to shy away from political participation, as one male citizen noted:

I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that back in older generations a Democrat and a Republican were as different as day and night and there's been a gradual shift from the right and left ends towards the center and you really can no longer tell the difference between a Democrat and a Republican and uh, just by looking at them, looking at their campaign politics of gun control, abortion, uh, Medicare, stuff like that, welfare; and it's gotten to the point that we don't see a

difference in . . . this person has very much different views from the other person. So we don't feel that we really even need to know. What's the difference gonna make? That's what it has come down to for younger generations.

Young generations do not see much of a difference between the two parties that make up the traditional political system, especially when it comes to interpreting politics through their post-materialistic values. This lack of political distinction confuses them, makes them question the two-party system, and perhaps become even more apathetic. As the four previous thematic elements have indicated, younger citizens do not feel a need for government and their post-materialialistic value system does not require their political involvement.

### *Adults*

Adults respond differently when articulating post-materialistic versus materialistic values. Their responses suggest the adoption of a mixture of these two value systems, based largely on such life experiences as raising a family and also such materialistic matters as owning homes and paying taxes. As mentioned previously, one adult male noted that politics and community concerns become relevant when you find a home and realize that taxes and other issues also become important. When these adults talked about politics, their expressions articulated a blend of materialistic and post-materialistic values. Here, two main ideas support the adult groups' "both/and" placement on the materialism versus post-materialism continuum. First, the mixing of post-materialistic values with political agendas suggests that adults see a link between governmental/political action and the fulfillment of higher-order values. Second, some adult participants pointed out that citizens' material comfort and security in recent

decades has led to a “lackadaisical” attitude towards political involvement. One adult female observed:

The biggest [example of politics] that I’ve . . . seen is being a worker at the Museum of Art and Archaeology. And that has a lot of politics in that recently with the budget cuts and they have cut hours, staff, programming. It is really getting fairly disastrous.

This observation shows an attachment to the post-materialistic value of art and individual aesthetics while still emphasizing economics, job loss, and budgets. Here, the materialistic value of economics and financial security (one’s job) is balanced by a focus on the arts.

One adult male summarized the difference between generations, while indicating a clear value shift from materialistic to post-materialistic values:

I think we all choose our methods of involvement, but we’re involved in one thing or another, we try this or that, it may not necessarily be political. I’m not . . . I don’t think dad was involved in political things, but in some ways he was because he . . . it was basically for betterment. He thought he found a committee that was trying to get public water into our area and the fire department . . . but a lot of times, I know where we are, a lot of those things are already provided for us; and I think that’s maybe why we’re so lackadaisical. We are because we’re comfortable.

A comment by a female member of the adult group emphasized the oscillating position of citizens in the adult generation – between materialistic and post-materialistic values – by indicating her perspective as a *younger* member of the adult group was slightly different than her colleagues:

When I was younger, I was young in the eighties and really . . . when you were a teenager in the eighties you had never seen a war, just read about it in history books. So the world was, I mean, why be involved when everything was going great? This is how I felt, and I could be wrong, but things were going well...”

This participant was immediately interrupted by other adult group members who stated that their view of the eighties was slightly different. One female said, “Oh no! The eighties, that was Reagan, that was bad!” A male added, “The eighties? Rough!” And the younger adult female concluded:

I was 16 years old in 1985, so you know, I had never seen a war, didn’t need to worry about a job; and as long as we were okay...the farmers would always talk about how they didn’t have money, but I didn’t know...I would see all these jobs on TV . . . I watch now, I see. But umm, I didn’t pay any attention to politics because . . . because I thought we could go and everything was great, why change it?

If Putnam (2000) is correct – that it is when we are young that is most influential to our eventual civic involvement – then this woman clearly represents the shifting middle generation quite well. And if Inglehart’s (1997) generational replacement thesis is correct, then this shift to a sense of security and away from basic needs often provided by government is also well explained by the story this woman shared about her life.

### *Seniors*

Seniors, on the other hand, were more focused on issues of security, health, and protection. Seniors indicated that politics is about money and security, and they also concurred that feelings of security over time may lead to apathy. One female said, “Well



sure, it's all money, gotta get money in, period." The focus on money was also explained by a senior male participant with this example of his experience as a poll worker:

What I remember was they paid us three dollars for a day's work. They had 1546 people at the polls that day, and they divided the uh, add another precinct into the ward; but uh . . . now I don't know, I guess they pay 40 to 50 dollars a day to do the same thing. That was the best they could do; and it was considered a volunteer job and they paid for eating. I remember that one.

Even when the senior participants discussed other generations' motivations and values, the focus was on money. A senior female concluded:

I feel like most of our young people have not had to really face difficult times ummm, money is given to them and they aren't bothered to work for it and ask for it. They get their education . . . they really haven't experienced what goes into giving them what they have now.

Seniors also gave examples of how their own life experiences, often times illustrating their struggle for security or ability to subsist, were influential in developing their materialistic value system. A senior male shared this story:

When I was in Chapel Hill about ten years ago I worked . . . I was trying to get the corps of engineers to uh, rebuild this area where I had . . . helping people who lost everything in their beautiful but cheap apartments. So I lived in one room and all the others were downstairs. They wouldn't do anything about it. It was, they said, 'not their problem.' They started tearing down the apartment and building . . . so I gave up and came here.

Throughout their discussions, finances and security were foremost issues for seniors, and while they may have mentioned being involved in such community affairs as the civil rights movement, they mentioned that these activities were undertaken to help others be secure in their own communities. “A mixed couple in St. Louis . . . it just wasn’t safe,” said one senior female. And another male senior added:

[My wife] was part of the Congress of Racial Equality that has set this up, a non-violent program and they didn’t uh . . . mix . . . uh you know, a white male with a black female or a black man with a white female. That would have just blown everybody’s minds, at that time. It doesn’t now, but would have then, in St. Louis.

*Summary.* For these seniors, the current political concerns do not seem to address the same threat to one’s security as the political and social issues these citizens dealt with during an earlier period. This suggests that post-materialistic or individualistic values might be more important to young citizens today than to older generations who well remember their struggles to provide for themselves and, in some instances, their struggles simply to survive. As the necessity for even basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, security) have now largely been met for most citizens, desires and interests turn increasingly to higher-level needs. The fact that both adult and senior groups agree that security leads to apathy, and that younger generations have not experienced a lack of basic needs – often provided by the government – might explain why political action or engagement for young citizens is an individual rather than communal experience.

#### Third Person Effect

Previously, Third Person Effect (TPE) was described as a possible theoretical explanation for why generations might not view themselves the same way that other

generations do. TPE suggests that individuals will view their own reception of messages more positively than those around them. For example, a positive message from a public service announcement will be received more favorably by an individual than it will by their peers in a self-assessment. A negative message will affect others more negatively than it will individuals who self-report. In the case of the present study, one might assume that individuals will report their own involvement more favorably than they would report their perceptions of others' involvement.

The data presented here appears to indicate that cross-generational perceptions are fairly consistent. While the young citizens claim they have little to no political knowledge, both adults and senior groups agree with this assessment. Where generations seem to differ is where they place the blame for this problem. This difference is illuminating for this particular study because if all generations agree on the symptoms of political (dis)engagement, if not the actual disease, then perhaps it is possible to better understand how each generation sees their place in the political process differently. In short, as different generations construct themselves as part of the process, they redefine what the political process *is*.

Another way that TPE is important in this study is in understanding how different groups perceive other generations' political involvement in previous years. Young citizens seemed to think their parents were never involved politically, but their grandparents "had to be back in those days." However, adult groups provided examples of their own involvement – from the Viet Nam war, to environmental issues and social movements. One male participant from an adult group said, "I remember walking on campus in college, there were signs everywhere for the environment and

involvement...now all you see are commercials on campus.” Younger citizens’ perceptions that their parents’ generation was not politically involved when they were younger appears to be flawed. Young citizens tend to believe that what they see right now from their parents and grandparents is consistent with how things were “back then”—especially in regards to their parents’ civic and political engagement. Adult generations also indicated that older generations – *their* parents – view “every younger generation” as less involved and see this problem as a progression or trend that has continued to build over time. As will be discussed in Chapter Five, this progression or trend has a great affect on political involvement in general, and not just for younger generations.

#### Interactions

The final level of analysis is an examination of how individuals interacted within their groups. Not surprisingly, most individuals took ample time to begin responding. This was true across the different generations. All generations were polite to each other, and usually respectful. Where the three groups differed slightly was in the linguistic construct of narrative use and the conversational style of disagreement with other members of the group.

#### *Narratives*

Narratives are generally used as support for the claims that individuals might make or use to more fully illustrate their point. When talking about their political involvement, participants frequently told stories to illustrate their engagement. While these stories were sometimes long and involved, others were less developed or merely hypothetical examples framed as a narrative that might eventually happen. The

difference in the length and detail of the narratives is apparent across generations. Young citizens did not have narratives of their own to tell, while seniors and adults had a great deal to say about their political experiences. A plausible explanation for this difference is that young citizens do not have the full range of life experiences that senior citizens have had and therefore younger citizens have fewer stories to tell. However, what is interesting is that while the adult groups told contemporary stories of current life activities, the seniors focused largely on political experiences from their youth. In fact, the narratives told by seniors usually centered around their experiences from when they were young—about the very age of the young citizens represented in this study (who, again, had very few narratives of their own political engagement to share). In the end, the explanation that young citizens simply do not have enough experience to draw on for narrative support of their political or civic engagement does not seem logical considering the numerous stories that citizens in the senior groups had to share from their youthful days. This finding suggests that the narratives of each group should be relatively equal across each generation if each group experienced similar involvement in the political process. As is evidenced below, however, it is clear that the younger generations' reliance on their individual interests and needs, hypothetical examples, and knowledge acquisition as a form of political action are expressions and behaviors that do not lend themselves to the type of detailed life narratives that characterize older generations' political engagement.

#### *Young Citizens*

As noted, young citizens did not seem to share narratives as willingly as other groups. In fact, young citizens had to be pressed for stories and narratives about their

involvement. Even then, their stories were short, limited to local issues, and often hypothetical. One female said, “I don’t know, I was on student council for two years when I was in high school; but then I decided it’s like absolutely pointless and there was no real political substance to it.” Other participants mentioned individuals that they knew who were politically involved, as one male said, “I know this guy, he wants to be president in like 30 years or something.” But their narratives were most often unclear and not fully developed.

### *Adults*

Adult participants, on the other hand, had detailed examples of stories and narratives that they shared to support their points and arguments. One adult male recounted:

I used to volunteer as a fire fighter and umm, we were going to try and pass a levy or the county was going to try and pass a levy that would, property tax levy, that would fund some equipment for us; and of course, as volunteer fire fighters, we thought this was very important – stuff we wore and upgrading the trucks and so, we umm . . . would go around to people in our district and talk to them and ask them to vote and vote yes. So that was political, as I see it, but it was also community involvement.

Two things are important about this citizen’s narrative. First, his political involvement is defined by specific policy issues. Second, his example is of a communal need or activity with the political outcome designed to aid the entire community. Another adult shared this story of her involvement:

I have run for committee woman and then I decided that all of it was just a little too big for me, so I didn't do anything. Well, the other person on the ballot was an incumbent and had worked for this so she got more votes than I did. But I did have my name on the ballot. I think I voted for myself, but umm, the other person wasn't the right political leaning that I was and they talked me into running because I was more, they liked my politics a little bit better, but uh...

Adults seemed to have specific and detailed accounts of their involvement, and narratives that often illustrated the efficacy of their efforts. These narratives were long and detailed accounts. One woman told her story:

Umm, I suppose, I think of, my most profound . . . along those lines was I had a son that was in junior high and a two year old and a one year old (F: WOW!). Lived in rural Tennessee. I was at that time teaching and umm, the umm city that I taught in had a very high level of per capita of well educated people because there was a university there, but they had old good old boy politics. And umm politics ran the school system, so the uh superintendent was not progressive with education by any means. And um, the junior high, there was one junior high that was falling down and just in bad shape and the principal ummm did basic sins in my opinion like name calling and thought nothing of popping kids if they caused trouble. And it just went on and on and this was in the 70s. So a bunch of us that had taught in the system went to this one principal and said why don't you run for superintendent and we will back you. And he's like 'Uh, I don't know.' Long story short, we backed him, he ran, and he got it and everything changed. He was in for 20 years and built a new junior high, found money for it, ummm, got some

new principals in there that were pro education rather than pro cheerleaders and football teams and – not that I’m opposed to those – I believe they should have a lesser place in education. (*verbal agreement from other participants*) And uh, so it was, it felt real good. It feels good going back and knowing that I helped do that, and I was out with my uh, my ummm three year old, and she had these bouncy curls, real cute, outside the polls with signs and talking to people and that I was a teacher and wanted a better education for my kids than what’s been given there now. And it was people like that, that you know, made the difference.

Much like their younger counterparts, adults told stories that often included the actions of other people. But similar to their older generational counterparts, adults had many examples and stories to share that included details of their own political involvement. Once again, the adult groups seem in between the senior and youth groups – not only in age but also in the narrative construction of their political involvement.

### *Seniors*

Seniors had many experiences to share, yet their narratives focused mainly on national political issues. While adults focused on “smaller” or more local affairs, the seniors seemed to have “larger” experiences (in terms of political impact). Additionally, the senior groups shared detailed stories that they were convinced constituted effective political involvement. One female told the story of her involvement in the civil rights movement. While this activity focused on her individual actions, she also explained how this activity fit into the larger political landscape:

Well, I was part of the sit-ins in St. Louis (F: I was too) to integrate restaurants in the city of St. Louis in 1950. So I would go with a black woman to a cafeteria,



Holling's cafeteria. I would be in front of her and I would have her tray and I would say 'I would like this' and I would receive food, of course; and she would say 'I would like this' and they would put garbage on her tray. And then we would ask to see the manager and ask the manager to uh . . . let us, because they were always arguing 'Well, we'll lose our customers if we let blacks here.' And we would ask the manager to let us one time a month uh . . . to eat in the restaurant – a black woman and white woman – to prove to them that they weren't going to lose business. And if they agreed, then over a period of time, we would increase the number of black people in the sit ins and so on. And eventually the restaurants were integrated; but in 1950 when I came to St. Louis the only place that a black person could eat in downtown St. Louis was a stand-up counter at Woolworth's and there was, you know, one counter. So if you came down to shop you would have to arrange to eat before you came or after you went home or whatever. And the YMCA was 18 blocks away, and you could eat there. And you would walk through an industrial area to get to it.

One senior male shared a similar experience of his struggles with racial discrimination and, again, he placed his individual involvement in terms of the larger political landscape:

Being white we didn't necessarily feel the sting of it that black people did; but they uh . . . the public places there were, this is St. Louis, but in the Navy. Well, drinking fountains were white, drinking fountains were colored and there were restrooms for whites and restrooms for coloreds and the railroad stations and bus stations and umm . . . when I was drafted in 1953 and we collected to take the bus

from (*unclear city name*) to Fort Riley, one of our group of five was black and he . . . we went across the street to get something to eat before we boarded and the proprietor wouldn't serve him, and the uh . . . in fact, in the Army, none of us ate, it wasn't . . . we did the right thing, but this was . . . uh . . . I was . . . it was kind of hard to realize that I was grown up and we were going to quote 'serve our country' close quote and this kid couldn't get food in St. Louis.

*Summary*

Although their narratives were personal in nature, the older citizens put their narratives into the larger context of significant social movements in which they participated. In the end, the main difference between the narratives across the generations seemed to be based on the level of personal experience and commitment. In the language of the senior groups, while their actions involved local activities as previously mentioned, these participants would frame their experiences as part of a larger political action or struggle. Interestingly, as the groups increased in age, so did the impact of their stories.

*Disagreement*

Disagreement occurred when the groups felt comfortable enough with one another to disagree. Overall, adult groups were the most likely to disagree, while the young citizens were the least likely. In their discussions, in fact, the youth claimed that they did not have the knowledge to be able to disagree with others and expressed the need to gain more information and the need to listen to others rather than argue with them about politics. The adults stated, again, that they did not feel there were sufficient public forums for political discussion; but when the opportunity presented itself, the adults in the

FGIs seemed willing to disagree with each other. The senior groups, on the other hand, did not like to disagree as it appeared these citizens were intent on being polite and respectful to others.

### *Young Citizens*

Young citizens were the least likely of all the generations to disagree when others expressed their views, and these group participants typically just went along with the flow of the conversation. More often than not, young citizens would say “I agree” or nod their heads, or simply sit silent until they were asked if they agreed. On the few occasions when there was disagreement, students would say such things as, “I disagree, but she has a point here...” as if to provide some “softening” to their disagreement. Although this linguistic technique represents an argumentative strategy in general, it did differ from the other generations’ use of disagreement and agreement strategies.

### *Adults*

Adults disagreed more often, would interrupt each other, and frequently would find no difficulty telling others directly that they disagreed with what they were arguing. One adult female told the group that it was difficult for her son to find information on candidates, and in mid-sentence another female said, “Most politicians even locally have websites. It is quite easy to umm . . . understand their philosophy, I think.” Another female adult was defining political action as community volunteering, yet before she could elucidate her view another group member stopped her, “I didn’t think it was volunteering. I would just see it as being involved in your community whether as a volunteer or as a professional.” Throughout their discussions, the adults wanted to be

certain that their differences with others' views were not lost and thus were quick to interject their distinctions.

One adult group was particularly difficult to follow because of their numerous interruptions and disagreements, and individuals in this group seemed to relish interjecting their opinions into the conversation as others were talking. Ironically, their interruptions were numerous even when they were discussing the fact that no forums were available for public discussion and forums particularly that promoted civil discourse of political issues.

### *Seniors*

Seniors, on the other hand, had a tendency to finish each other's stories, or compliment another's story with their own narrative. One female told the story of her involvement in the war, and a senior male picked up on her experience to share his similar involvement in the war. While seniors did not always agree, they usually made it clear that their stories were somehow linked or supported each other. One male respondent continued a story from a female about the civil rights movement, "And Mary, you did all that . . . all I did was protest and walk out. She was part of the program." As the above exchange illustrates, rather than disagreeing with one another, seniors found opportunities to compliment or feed off one another during their discussions.

### *Summary*

The young citizens did not disagree because they seemed to have few experiences to share with others or to interject and counter others' experiences. Additionally, younger citizens did not seem to extend others' experiences or relate to them because of their individualist experiences with political engagement. The adult

groups were almost the complete opposite. Adults wanted to share their experiences and were eager to have their stories heard and elaborated upon when possible. Adults were also eager to disagree and allow others to disagree with them. This seems to suggest that their own political experience was important to share with their peers. Finally, the seniors were willing to share their views and experiences – but not with the intent to disagree. Instead, seniors wanted to associate themselves with others’ community experiences and connect their life with others’ life experiences. The disagreement patterns across the groups support the thesis that young citizens focus on their individual experiences, senior groups want to share a community experience, and adult groups while proud of their individual actions and interests, wanted the community to acknowledge their experiences. The conversational use of disagreement, then, supports the individual-communitarianism dichotomous theme discussed previously in this chapter.

### Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings from the data that was collected from 21 FGIs. In examining the word choices from each group, general conclusions are drawn about the language different citizens choose for defining politics and describing their involvement in the political process. The examination of emergent dichotomous themes from the FGI’s illustrates the distinctions that groups draw about their political experience and their place in the political process. Finally, analysis of the interactions of the groups provides a sense of *how* they talk about politics and how they talk with others. In sum, this data provides the basis for conclusions to be drawn in the final chapter that follows about how individuals create their “self” in the political process.

What is clear from this chapter is that there are qualitative differences in how individuals view themselves, and other generations, in the political process. Chapter Five interprets these results from several theoretical perspectives, including social constructionism, and Generational Replacement and Post-Modernization from Inglehart. Social constructionism helps us understand how individuals talk about their political involvement and their creation of political selves; and Inglehart's theoretical ideas, supported by the findings of this study, help us understand how the discursively constructed political selves differ from generation to generation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

In the beginning chapters of this study, several problems and questions were posed about the decreasing voter turnout of younger citizens. The following chapter seeks to use the analysis presented in Chapter Four to answer directly the questions and problems raised at the outset of this study. By utilizing the theoretical perspective of Inglehart's post-Modernization thesis and the concept of generational replacement to understand these citizen discussions, it is clear that the young citizens are disengaged from traditional modes of civic and political involvement because of a shift in their values. Furthermore, young citizens are defining civic engagement in different ways from their older counterparts and viewing their role in that process differently. Individual action has taken over for public involvement and post-modern values are replacing materialistic values held by older generations.

In order to understand the implications of the analysis, it is important to revisit the research questions and then discuss those implications in terms of theory development. In hermeneutical phenomenology, it is possible that new theoretical constructs will be developed as the phenomenon is examined and reinterpreted. Therefore, while answering the research questions, new theory is proposed with an explication of the general model that existing theory helps develop. The development of this new theory/model leads to discussion of further implications and also suggestions for further study.

*Summary of Analysis*

The first research question, how individuals describe their involvement in the political process, is best answered by the general reaction that groups had to a discussion about politics. As detailed in Chapter Four, across the generations politics is considered to be “dirty” or “bad” when first introduced as a topic of conversation. However, citizens of all groups in this study were willing to share their feelings and responses regarding the political system despite their initial negative reactions. This general negative response indicates something even more interesting: Even if individuals react negatively or express a lack of opinion about politics and engagement, they still use that language to define themselves as part of or outside of the political process. If Doppelt and Shearer (2000) are correct that there are different types of non-voters, then the way in which individuals talk about their political inaction or disinterest also defines them in relationship to the existing political system.

The analysis also suggests that younger citizens do not have the tools to define politics in the same way that other generations do. Younger citizens scramble for ideas about what might or might not be considered an acceptable definition of politics. Therefore, they are more likely to talk about local issues or current issues pertinent to them such as school activities or watching the news and other media programs. Adult groups in this study tend to discuss politics in terms of their individual actions, mainly volunteering activities. This focus on individual activity may be a reaction to their parents’ generation, or the senior generation, who still rely heavily on voting and campaigning as a definition of political involvement.



Definitions of civic engagement also differ across generations. The younger generations talk about gaining information, the adult groups talk about volunteerism/grassroots, and the senior groups talk about campaigning and voting processes. This morph or shift in definition across the three generational groups is illustrated by the specific language used by the different groups in their initial reactions to the word “politics.”

Younger generations in this study were reluctant to share their views, adult groups were opinionated and often negative, and senior generations indicated that politics was an important activity. Instead of focusing on what all three groups had in common (politics is “dirty” for example), a focus on where they differ in their language illuminates this definitional shift from generation to generation. The shift or morph in how individuals view politics provides support for Inglehart’s post-modernization thesis—that values shift and change over time and generational replacement will occur altering the way a society’s political system will function.

In short, the way a group defines civic engagement will be indicative of how that group enacts civic engagement. In this case, young citizens define civic action from an individualistic standpoint and therefore find information gathering to be political involvement. Adults in this study define civic action in terms of community and thus are active in grassroots activities and volunteerism. Seniors define civic involvement as campaigning and voting and therefore act accordingly by supporting traditional political institutions. The way citizens define civic engagement for themselves indicates what value they place on engagement and thus the way they act within (or outside of) the political process.

The thematic analysis provides answers to the second research question, how do citizens from different age groups describe themselves and others involved in the political process? Here, individuals use language that describes their placement or self-concept within the political system. In talking about their roles, their perceptions, and their views of others in the community, citizens in this study indicate not only how they define the political system, but construct their role in that system. In short, citizens are describing the community they live in and how they participate in that democracy.

As indicated in Chapter Four, five dichotomies characterize the themes that emerged from the FGIs: **system versus individuals; knowledge versus action; talk versus no talk; individualism versus communitarianism; and post-materialism versus materialism.** Taking into account these five dichotomies and the generations represented in the FGIs, a new model or lens for viewing civic engagement is supported. The Generational Identity Continuum is presented in Table 5 (see appendix D). The Continuum represents the placement of generations between the extremes of the dichotomous opposites. Political selves are created by the language citizens used to identify their political involvement.

This chart is labeled the “Generational Identity Continuum” (GIC) to reflect the various ways that members of different generations linguistically construct their political identities along the major continuums found in the FGI data. It should be noted that these continua are only based on the interpretation of the researcher. They are by no means fixed constructs in representing political attitudes and behavior (although these constructs might be tested in further empirical analyses). Nonetheless, this model provides solid support for the general conclusions that young citizens focus on individualistic and post-

materialistic values, they tend to feel that political talk is important, but rarely engage in such discourse, and they place more importance on acquiring political knowledge than engaging in political action. Thus, the GIC illustrates how young citizens feel that political knowledge, or gaining political knowledge, represents effective citizenship and appropriate political action. Finally, young citizens place faith or hope for change in individual actors and people rather than political parties, institutions or communities. Practically, this means that younger citizens are more likely to consider third-party candidates, they want their political system to focus on post-materialistic values, and they do not feel that their individual involvement will produce any effect on the system as a whole. Post-materialistic values include, but are not limited to, individual rights and freedoms, lifestyle choices, quality of life issues rather than security, and basic needs such as food and shelter.

Adult citizens in this study indicated that individuals should act on their individual values and beliefs *for* the community. This generation also believes in volunteerism and engagement in community programs as appropriate political action. In some ways adults are similar to younger citizens. However, adults also believe that the government can affect needed change; that individual actors can influence the system; and that both materialistic as well as post-materialistic values are important. Therefore, like the younger citizens, adults do not generally look for change within the political system; but like their senior counterparts, they are more likely to *participate* in the system. Rather than just putting faith in knowledge about politics, adults believe action is necessary. While adults feel talk about politics is important, they likewise feel somewhat

uncomfortable talking about politics with others. They want more discussion opportunities where they feel safe talking about political issues.

Finally, senior citizens in this study still place a lot of faith in the two-party political system. They believe that the political system, in general, works, even if individual action seems less likely to produce a direct effect. Seniors are still focused on materialistic values such as shelter, food, and the basic needs that individuals and communities need to survive. While seniors believe strongly in community action, they also believe that voting is the most effective political action one can take. Unlike adult citizens, seniors do not focus on political talk but rather focus on the vote as their main form of communication between the citizen and the government. Therefore, if a younger citizen is civically engaged through volunteerism and protests, a senior citizen indicate such activity is “good” but does not view these behaviors as political involvement. Furthermore, senior groups were clear in their communication that knowing about the system and how it works was not enough. In short, citizens need to vote in order to be a part of the political system.

Another important aspect of generational differences gleaned from the analysis in Chapter Four is that older generations in this study recognize the younger generations’ struggles with time and interest in civic issues. Older citizens acknowledge that they had more time—and still have more time—than younger citizens for civic involvement. All of the groups are in agreement that political knowledge is important for political action. However, younger citizens find political action to be difficult, and find their knowledge of the system lacking. Stemming from this acknowledgment, younger citizens say they need more education despite their lack of interest. As young citizens in this study note,

the knowledge they need is not necessarily about who is running or what the candidates stand for, but rather knowledge about how the system works—for them— and a better understanding of their role in the system. Younger generations feel the system does not work for them, it is too large or complex for them to understand, and that they do not have the time to learn more or become active. This may be due in part to the fact that older generations do the work for them. Because older generations tend to work with the system, younger generations may not have to bother with it. More specific reasons for why younger citizens are able to ignore political activity are provided in the following section on post-modernization.

Answering the third research question, how do citizens engage in communication about the political process, requires an analysis of the different groups' interactions. The fact that most citizens tell political stories or narratives is not surprising. As we learned from Gameson (2000), citizens use personal experience and knowledge to talk about politics. This is especially true when citizens are sharing with others in groups or in interpersonal conversations such as the FGIs allowed. In these discussions, younger citizens tend to not disagree with each other, perhaps because they feel they do not have the knowledge to do so. Adults and seniors in this study, while polite, are more willing to disagree with each other and provide reasons for their disagreement. Adults were the most likely of all age groups to express disagreement. This tendency may be explained by their age and life experiences, their level of political involvement, and the balancing adults seek to achieve between support of the political system and their focus on individual actors that often challenge the existing political order.

Citizens between 30-60 years of age have a good deal of experience to draw upon to use as evidence when they disagree with others about political activity. They have more experience than younger citizens, and unlike senior citizens the adults came of age during periods of social unrest and may have engendered greater tolerance for political disagreement. Adult groups in this study are also more active than their younger and older counterparts and therefore may feel comfortable talking about their experiences—even when these experiences are offered in opposition to the views and life experiences of their peers. Finally, because adult citizens tend to believe in individual and post-materialistic values, but also believe that working within the system can affect change, they are more likely to argue the merits of individual action versus support for the existing political system.

#### Extending Theory

There are two theories that provide explanations for 1) why we see patterns across generations; and 2) what such patterns say about the creation of political selves across generational lines. First, as posited in Chapter Two, Inglehart (1997) suggests that younger generations do not feel the desire or need to vote because they are disconnected from the political system. This disconnect is not based on laziness or disinterest as much as it is based on younger citizens' inability to see a link between their lives and the role of government in their lives. Arguably, this disconnect is due to a focus by young citizens on what Inglehart calls "post-modernist" values. These values include such interests as the arts, personal achievement and lifestyle choices and the fulfillment of these desires are not connected to government action. Rather, the traditional political system functions

more to help individuals fulfill such materialistic values and needs as food, security, shelter and lower need-based desires.

The post-modernization thesis helps explain the differences in how the generational groups talk about their political experiences and views of the political process. Particularly, these differences are evident in how the different groups define politics. Younger generations focused on individual actors (often actors that challenged the political system) and local events, while older generations focused on the traditional political system and national events or social movements. The senior generation's focus on larger movements to help individuals secure basic rights (including security and the ability to survive) is explained by the post-modernization thesis. In particular, the generational value shift shows that younger generations tend to focus on post-materialistic values (individual rights, personal freedoms, aesthetic desires), while older generations focus on materialistic values (security, food, shelter). The attainment of materialistic values reflects a reliance upon the community to survive; post-materialistic values reflects personal choice and individual desires.

Additionally, as is indicated by the GIC model, each dichotomy demonstrates the gradual decline in focus on modernist values in younger generations. Older generations are more likely to take action in support of the system, while younger generations are more likely to rely on their personal knowledge of politics. The adult generation is stuck between gaining knowledge and acting on that knowledge within the system. Younger generations are also less likely to talk about politics with their peers or with other generations because they fear they lack sufficient knowledge; whereas older generations feel more inclined to engage others about politics due to their experiences with the

political system. Older generations feel a stronger sense of community, united by their involvement in the political system, while younger generations are more likely to feel a sense of individualism.

All of the claims presented so far are also subject to the “generational replacement” thesis. In short, there are no set “gaps” between the younger and older generations, but rather a gradual replacement with the younger generation’ guiding values as older generations pass away. As a society based on a materialistic value system shifts to a post-materialistic one, less and less importance is placed on the act of being involved directly with the political system, particularly through voting. Therefore, the decline in voter involvement by younger generations is explained and supported by this study.

Second, how individuals create themselves within the political system is explained both by Inglehart’s thesis and by social constructionism through communication. As individuals communicate, they create a reality for themselves. In the case of constructing political selves, we see younger generations creating a world through their language that does not require them to be directly involved in the political system. Adult generations, however, struggle with their role in the political system because they are unsure where they wish to focus their energies, and particularly whether or not to be involved at a national level.

Finally, older generations still cling to the *necessity* of their direct involvement in the political system. Therefore, as each group defines politics for themselves they place themselves inside or outside of that system. The language represented in the dialogue produced through the FGIs clearly demonstrates that there is a qualitative difference in how different age groups create their view of themselves in terms of civic engagement.



*Limitations, Implications, and Contributions to Literature*

As with any study, there are obvious limitations with a project of this type and scope. First, a larger number of groups would have provided more data for even stronger arguments through more examples. Second, the second phase of the data collection could have been made stronger through a larger and more diverse pool of citizens much like the 2000 data collection. Third, qualitative data such as this is always interpreted through the eyes of the researcher. Although attempts were made to make sure the interpretation was representative of the participants' experiences (through double checking with participants), the researcher's perceptual biases will always affect meanings gleaned from the texts.

Finally, as with all FGI studies, this particular researcher learned from the participants as the study progressed. Indeed, slight modifications in question wording for subsequent groups were made in order to ascertain more detailed descriptions of citizens' involvement in the political process. While political involvement is never an easy subject to discuss, this type of study does elucidate reasoning that participants provide for their involvement and produces deeper insights into the minds of citizens than a mass survey might produce. For the current study, depth rather than breadth was achieved, and the limitations noted here are no more problematic than one might expect in another study of this kind.

Ultimately, what has been learned through this study is that declines in political engagement by younger citizens is explained not by generational gaps or losses in civic commitment from one generation to the next, but by the natural shift in values as a democratic society matures and as one generation replaces another. Mediated by political

events and climates, such shifts are only visible in hindsight and should not be used as predictors of future voter citizen behaviors. Current studies that fixate on the voter decline thesis seek all manner of remedies that will supposedly “fix” the problem of young citizens’ abstention from voting. For example, solutions that have been proposed include altering voter registration procedures that will make voting easier (such as same-day registration or), the creation of a national voter holiday, allowing longer balloting periods that extend beyond the typical one-day voting, using new technologies to facilitate voting from remote or locations, among many other possible remedies. The findings presented in this study clearly indicate that such solutions would only be temporary and may not be at all effective. Rather, attention needs to be focused on how we define political and civic engagement. As younger generations redefine themselves in terms of the political system, so must research redefine younger generations’ forms of civic and political involvement.

Also, when considering the generational replacement thesis, it becomes clear that viewing voter decline only in terms of age groups (i.e., younger people simply do not vote, older people do) is much too simplistic and problematic. If value shifts are occurring, as the findings in this study suggest, then changes to policy or practices such as voting will not induce younger generations (even as they age) to vote or become directly involved in the political system. Rather, it would behoove researchers to focus on what these value shifts and changes might mean for the political process and democracy itself.

This study also begins to address what Asen (2004) calls a “discourse theory of citizenship” (p. 189) and the proposed perspective of communicative engagement

(McKinney, Kaid, & Bystrom, 2005). By examining political discourse as everyday talk, this study takes into account a largely ignored way of examining voter involvement, civic engagement and political activity. Such an approach shifts the focus from self-reported political behaviors to constructed political realities through discourse. While individuals use talk as a way to create themselves as political beings, these citizens also use talk as a way of becoming civically and politically engaged.

Finally, this study suggests that changes need to be made in the ways current research views the ever-present voter decline thesis. First, research should consider generation “gaps” as an obsolete (or at least limited) way of studying generational differences in political behavior. Second, political communication scholars should begin to become more involved in studies of political discourse since communication is so closely tied with the creation of political actors (citizens), with such analysis specifically focusing on the language and talk citizens use to create themselves as part of or outside of the political system. Third, current gauges of the polity’s interests should be tested. With so many participants in this study feeling disconnected from the political system, blame should be shifted from citizens’ lack of interest in government to government’s lack of interest in citizens’ concerns. Finally, this study places the individual at the forefront of political engagement. Too often researchers are tempted to examine democracy from a macro perspective instead of focusing on the individuals who make up our democracy. In the case of this study, the researcher focused on the individual as the primary subject, making the citizen the principal building block of our democratic system. Instead of simply focusing on how the system is flawed, this current approach looks at how the system (democracy) is created. This analysis provides a clearer understanding of how

citizens communicatively engage their democracy and create themselves as part of an ever-changing process.

### Conclusion

It is time to re-examine how we study civic engagement and time to consider political talk as a rhetorical act which creates citizens' identity, placing individuals inside or outside of the system. This communicative perspective opens up doors—or at least windows—for viewing political communication acts in ways unlike current research approaches.

The Urban Outfitters tee-shirt that says “Voting is for old people” is not meaningless—it *is* the message. This tee-shirt, which shared a message led to action when alarming polling numbers could not. If voting is for old people, talking about it is not. Examining generational development in the creation of political identity may be the key to understanding democratic citizenship. We only need to start talking about it.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONS FOR FGI COLLECTION PHASE II

The questions posed to the focus groups are based on the research questions presented in Chapter Two.

Intro: “This is a discussion about citizens and activity in the political process. Please feel free to share with me and the group answers to the questions. I would like to hear from all of you if possible and allow you to speak as long as you would like on each question. There are no right or wrong answers, rather this should be viewed as a discussion you might have with any set of friends, family, or others. I am not looking for agreement, so feel free to disagree with some of the ideas proposed in the discussion. This will be audio taped, so please do not identify yourself in any way but with your first name. At no point will your full name be used in the transcripts that will be made from these discussions.”

Before we begin our discussion, I would like to have everyone write a brief story or anecdote down about when either you or someone you knew has been involved in the political process. Feel free to write down any thoughts you have about politics, participation, or civic engagement.

RQ1: How do individuals describe their involvement in the political process?

2. Tell me story about when you have been involved in the political process.

Follow-Up:

How about a friend or family member involved in the process?

When was the last time you talked about politics? With whom?

Have you ever thought about being involved in politics? If so,  
how?

3. Some people say that people participate less in the political process than they ever have before. Others argue that people are still highly involved in the political process, but that participation “looks” different now than it used to. What do you think?
4. We often hear the terms “civic engagement” and “participation,” describe for me what that term means to you?

Follow-up:

What activities are involved in being “civically engaged”?

When do you feel citizens are being “civically involved” or  
“Politically engaged”?

5. Describe for me what activities you involve yourself in politically.

Follow-up:

How about when we are *not* in an election year?

RQ2: How do individuals describe their perceptions of their fellow citizens involvement in the political process?

1. Describe your peers and their involvement in the political process?

Your parents?

Your grandparents?

2. If we wanted to get more people involved in the process, how would you go about doing that?

RQ3: How do citizens from different age groups describe their own involvement in the political process?

1. How do your parents/grandparents/children/grandchildren involve themselves in the political process?

Follow-up:

Friends? Neighbors?

2. The 2004 election is coming, can you tell me how we might increase participation/engagement during that election?

RQ4: How do citizens from different age groups describe other citizen's involvement in the political process?

1. In previous elections there has been a decrease in voter turnout at the polls. What actions could be taken to increase civic activity in voting specifically?
2. Describe for me why *you* think there has been a decrease in voter activity?
3. How important is voting in the political process and civic engagement?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion?

APPENDIX B

Table 1

*First Presidential Debate, October 3, 2000*

---

<u>University</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Type of Group</u> (S=Student, A=Adult)	<u>Number of</u> <u>Participants</u>
Dickenson	Pennsylvania	S	11
Ohio U.	Ohio	S	7
Ohio U.	Ohio	A	6
University of Akron	Ohio	A	10
University of Missouri	Missouri	S	15
University of North Texas	Texas	S	15
University of Oklahoma	Oklahoma	A	12
University of Oklahoma	Oklahoma	A	11
TOTAL			48A, 39S  Total=87

---



Table 2

*Second Presidential Debate, October 11, 2000*

---

<u>University</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Type of Group</u> (S=Student, A=Adult)	<u>Number of</u> <u>Participants</u>
University of Florida	Florida	S	7
University of Florida	Florida	S	9
University of Florida	Florida	S	5
University of North Texas	Texas	S	9
University of Oklahoma	Oklahoma	A	10
TOTAL			10A, 36S Total=48

---

Table 3

*Third Presidential Debate, October 17, 2000*

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<u>University</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Type of Group</u> ( <u>S=Student,</u> <u>A=Adult</u> )	<u>Number of</u> <u>Participants</u>
University of Akron	Ohio	S	15
University of Idaho	Idaho	A	14
University of Missouri	Missouri	S	15
University of North Texas	Texas	S	7
University of Oklahoma	Oklahoma	A	10
TOTAL			24 A, 7 S, Total=61

---

Table 4

*Phase Two Participant Totals and Average Ages*

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<u>GROUP</u>	<u># of Participants</u>	<u>Average Age</u>
1 Senior	8	86
2 Senior	11	82
3 Senior	6	78
1 Adult	8	46
2 Adult	5	38
3 Adult	5	40
1 Youth	14	19
2 Youth	8	20
3 Youth	10	19

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APPENDIX C

Questions for First Presidential Debate (Oct. 3, 2000)

INTRODUCTION

“The purpose of this focus group discussion is to examine voter reactions to the presidential debate we just viewed. I am interested in your candid responses to the questions that I’ll ask. There are no right or wrong answers. Your opinions are important, and we are not seeking to reach agreement; so feel free to disagree with comments made by others. We’ll discuss a topic until everyone has said everything desired and then we’ll proceed to the next question. We’re recording this session so please speak clearly. The tape will be used to produce a transcript of the discussion, and your full name will not be identified on the transcript. Are there any questions? Let’s get started.”

*VOTER LEARNING*

1. *Did you learn anything about the candidates or the issues that you didn’t know prior to viewing tonight’s debate?*
2. *Did the debate influence your attitudes about the candidates or the issues?*
3. *Are there any issues of interest to you that were not discussed during the debate?*
4. *Were there any issues raised that you considered irrelevant or unimportant?*

*SOURCES OF INFORMATION*

1. *How do you think this debate compares with other sources of campaign information in helping you learn about the candidates and issues?*

[*PROBE*: Other sources such as network news, political ads, the party conventions, candidate speeches or rallies, talk-shows (such as *Opera, Regis*), call-in shows, Internet/on-line resources, etc.)

Follow-up question if group does not adequately discuss:

--Where do you get your information about the campaign and the candidates?

2. Do you use the Internet as a source for political information? How?

#### *VOTER (DIS)ENGAGEMENT*

1. In recent presidential elections, roughly half of those who can actually do vote. Why do you think many people seem to be uninterested or don't participate in the political process?
2. How do you think most people view the government?
3. (Assuming that you do), why do you participate in the political process?
4. What do you think could be done to encourage greater citizen participation?

QUESTIONS FOR SECOND & THIRD PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

*I. VOTER LEARNING*

1. Did you learn anything from this debate about the candidates or the issues that you didn't already know or perhaps learned from (one of) the previous debate(s)?
2. Did the debate tonight influence your attitudes about the candidates or the issues?
3. How many of you saw the first (and/or second) presidential debate? You may have noticed that the format for tonight's debate was different. How would you compare tonight's debate to the previous format(s)? *{May remind that the first debate was a more traditional debate with candidates standing behind podiums; the second debate was a less-structured debate with candidates sitting around a table. The third debate will be the Town-Hall debate}*

*Follow-Ups:*

- 2<sup>nd</sup> debate:
    - Do you feel this less-structured debate provides different information than the more formal debate?
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> debate:
    - If you can, compare the questions asked tonight by the citizens to those asked by Jim Lehrer in the previous debate(s). Do you feel there are any differences in the questions?
    - Do you feel you learn anything different about the candidates or the issues with citizens asking the questions?
4. Were there any issues raised or questions asked tonight that you considered

irrelevant or unimportant?

5. From the debate you saw tonight, and also including the previous debate(s) if you saw it/them, can you think of any issues that are important to you that have not been discussed?

## II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

1. How do you think this debate compares with other sources of campaign information in helping you learn about the candidates and issues?

[*PROBE*: Other sources such as network news, political ads, the party conventions, candidate speeches or rallies, talk-shows (such as *Opera, Regis*), call-in shows, Internet/on-line resources, etc.)

Follow-up question to use if group does not adequately discuss:

--Where do you get your information about the campaign and the candidates?

2. Do you use the Internet as a source for political information? How?

## VOTER (DIS)ENGAGEMENT

1. In recent presidential elections, roughly half of those who can actually do vote. Why do you think many people seem to be uninterested or don't participate in the political process?
2. How do you think most people view the government?
3. (*Assuming that you do*), why do you participate in the political process?
4. What do you think could be done to encourage greater citizen participation?

APPENDIX D

Table 5

*Generational Identity Continuum*

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<u>Value</u>	<u>Generation</u>	<u>Generation</u>	<u>Generation</u>	<u>Value</u>
SYSTEM	S	A	Y	INDIVIDUAL
ACTION	S	A	Y	KNOWLEDGE
TALK	A	S	Y	NO TALK
COMMUNITARIANISM	S	A	Y	INDIVIDUALISM
MATERIALISM	S	A	Y	POSTMATERIALISM

---

*Note.* For this table, S represents the senior groups, A represents the adult groups, and Y represents the young citizens groups.



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