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Abstract

Political engagement among U.S. emerging adults aged 18 to 24 was examined via quantitative and qualitative data. The data analyzed are from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The NSYR consists of three waves of a nationally representative (a) telephone survey (Wave 1 $n = 4,161$), (b) in-person interviews (Wave 3 $n = 230$) collected with adolescents and emerging adults, and (c) in the first wave, their parents ($n = 3,235$). Third-wave interview transcripts are examined for descriptions of political engagement. Findings indicate that emerging adults are generally politically disengaged. Political engagement is disaggregated into six types based on levels of and motivations for political engagement. A number of hypotheses are examined for explanations of political involvement variance. Voluntary association participation, religious practices, political affiliation, and parental political engagement are found to be insufficient explanations. Results indicate that individualized moral beliefs are a significant predictor of political engagement, especially certain types of disengagement.

Keywords

emerging adults, political involvement, civic engagement, moral values

As record numbers of emerging adults (Arnett, 2000a) turned out for the U.S. 2008 election, a buzz grew in the popular media, and in the popular culture more generally, that a new page was being written in the history of young

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apathy (e.g., Cave, 2008). The record number of young voters who showed up on Election Day to cast their ballot prompted many to conclude that the former era of youth civic apathy and disengagement (e.g., Putnam, 1995) may be finally coming to a close. Many have grown hopeful that young adults today, who seem to be entering the political scene with a renewed vigor, are turning over a new leaf of hope and involvement. If true, such a chance would indeed be altering years of social science research findings that predict that today's emerging adults will not so easily become highly civically and politically engaged. In fact, research shows that adolescents and emerging adults today tend to be less engaged in various forms of overt political activity and are less reliably and consistently involved in politics than previous cohorts of young citizens (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

To further explore these discrepant claims and expectations, this article explores the extent and character of contemporary emerging adults' political interests. This study employs qualitative and quantitative measures from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) and examines interviews with emerging adults conducted mere months prior to the 2008 election. The analysis explores the extent of political interest described by this new cohort of young voters, asking how do emerging adults understand their involvement with politics? Despite the increased number of emerging adults who showed up on Election Day, they pervasively described themselves as disengaged from politics shortly before the election. Many studies characterize political involvement as a binary variable with a simple presence/lack of involvement. This study analyzes political involvement in greater depth by disaggregating interview responses into a typology of political (lack of) involvement.

Democracy requires the active political participation of its people. A thriving republic depends on its citizens becoming civically informed and active to sustain communities of responsibility and freedom. Effective government requires an attentive and informed public that can envision a common good, interact with the political system, and hold government officials accountable. Furthermore, any thriving human life by most accounts requires some participation in civic life, extending oneself beyond one's own private world to participate in broader communities and public institutions. By doing so, people have the chance to learn more about the larger world, connect relationally with different kinds of people, consider how to build shared lives together that benefit all, and personally contribute to the well-being of others. However, little in the outlook on politics and public involvement among most emerging adults suggests that they have these interests, concerns, or experiences. Thus, another question of the study is what factors explain emerging adults' described lack of political interest? The six types of qualitative

responses are analyzed across quantitative and qualitative measures for explanations of this general political disengagement. The results of such an analysis have implications for the future of political involvement and can be engaged by people interested in working to increase political involvement among emerging adults. The typology described here and the explanations for variance across the typology provide evidence that those wishing to increase political involvement will need to employ a range of strategies that target each type of explanation for lack of political interest.

Theoretical Background

Civic Disengagement

Researchers find that adolescents and emerging adults are generally more politically disengaged than previous generations of citizens (e.g., Astin, Parrott, Korn, & Sax, 1997; Putnam, 1995). They tend to be less engaged in forms of overt political activity and are on average less reliably and consistently involved in politics than previous cohorts of citizens.

Hypothesis 1: Emerging adults participating in the NSYR interviews will describe themselves as generally politically disengaged, as evidenced by a described lack of interest and involvement in political matters.

Researchers study explanations for this lack of civic engagement from a number of angles and generally provide explanations that fall into two primary categories: those that address explanations for civic engagement as related to behaviors and practices and those that address explanations as related to beliefs and convictions.

Behavioral and Practice-Oriented Explanations

Explanations for civic disengagement that focus on behaviors and practices examine the relationship between political participation and family relationships, social ties, extracurricular activities, voluntary association participation, and religious service attendance. Smith (1999) finds evidence that close familial relationships early in life facilitate civic engagement for adolescents and emerging adults later on. She also finds that having extensive social connections beyond the family early on results in greater political participation later.

Hypothesis 2: Emerging adults participating in NSYR interviews who are politically disengaged will demonstrate low closeness to important family members, such as parents.

This concept of the importance of social ties and social connections among groups is well supported in the political involvement literature more generally (Fishman, 2004), and many researchers believe that emerging adult civic engagement rests firmly on being asked by your friends or social connections to become involved in politics (Campbell, 2004). The lack of emerging adult civic engagement according to these researchers would then be due to a lack of family, friendship, and social connections that support and introduce involvement in the political system.

Hypothesis 3: Emerging adults participating in NSYR interviews who are politically disengaged will demonstrate low social ties to friends who are politically engaged.

The role of social connections in political involvement relates to perhaps one of the most well-studied explanations for civic engagement—participation in voluntary associations. This behavioral explanation shares a history of thought traced back to Tocqueville (2003) who argued that participation in voluntary associations was crucial for a healthy democracy. The most well-known modern continuation of this line of thinking is through an argument that organizational involvement leads to increased political participation (e.g., Hanks, 1981; Putnam, 1993; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Another extension of voluntary association involvement explanations is studies that find community service in particular is important in enhancing civic engagement because helping those in need leads to a more general concern for social issues, leading to political participation (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003). Voluntary association and community service explanations would explain a lack of emerging adult civic engagement by demonstrating that their participation in organizations is low and therefore they are not participating in the first step toward further political involvement.

Integrally connected to these behavior and practices explanations are civic engagement studies that study the connection between political involvement and religious service attendance. Similar to voluntary association literature, these studies explore religious service attendance as an organizational behavior causing a greater willingness to become involved more generally, including in political activities. Smith (1999), for example, finds that religious participation leads to political participation, similarly to how she found other forms of

voluntary association participation influenced civic engagement. Researchers generally acknowledge that religious service attendance is on average in decline among young and emerging adults (e.g., Rahn & Transue, 1998; Smith, 2009). Thus, this line of researchers would conclude that declining emerging adult civic engagement is primarily a result of declining religious service attendance.

Another related behavior and practices explanation for civic engagement, specifically tailored to the activities of adolescents, is participation in extracurricular activities. Smith (1999) finds that participation in activities outside of the regular school day in early adolescence predicts later political involvement. Zaff, Moore, Papillo, and Williams (2003) find that extracurricular activity participation increases prosocial activities such as volunteering and voting. Verba et al. (1995) and McFarland and Reuben (2006) also find a connection between extracurricular activities early in life and adult voluntary and political participation. The basic conclusion then is that the young who are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities are also less likely to be civically engaged (e.g., Rasinski, Ingels, Rock, Pollack, & Wu, 1993).

Hypothesis 4: Emerging adults participating in NSYR interviews who are politically disengaged will demonstrate low involvement in other voluntary activities, such as volunteering, religious service attendance, and school-related activities.

Beliefs and Convictions-Oriented Explanations

Though less frequently studied, many social scientists additionally study the role of beliefs and convictions in forming interest in civic participation. This focus area is less explored within the civic engagement literature. This is perhaps due to the difficulties in knowing whether beliefs and convictions can be accepted as accurate information, having any connection to what the actual behavior is seen by the person stating a certain belief (e.g., Vaisey, 2009). Part of this skepticism about the accuracy of beliefs seems to stem from the fact that people can often be heard to contradict themselves. This is especially apparent when conducting interviews, as respondents frequently contradict themselves in trying to make sense of their lives (Snell, 2008). Nevertheless, beliefs and convictions are important aspects of social life, and research can help us to better understand them. As Gamson (1992) reveals, the contradictions themselves can indicate an important element of social life, insofar as contradictory statements are more apparent among those who are less informed and educated on a topic. Thus, ignoring contradictions in belief and conviction

statements may ignore important elements of socioeconomic status differences in social science research participants.

Those social scientists who brave the road to studying beliefs and convictions find that a central set of these tend to relate to civic participation. Trust and hope or distrust and pessimism, materialism or idealism, individualism and collectivism, and moral commitments are all studied as important elements in understanding interest in political participation. The more well known of these studies include those that study materialism and individualism. Bellah, Marsden, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) followed a Tocquevillian line of thought in exploring the extent to which U.S. citizens express interest in participating in collective activities, finding that the majority has a highly individualized focus, which is seen to be a result of the intense focus on materialism. The nature of focusing on material goods pulls people toward a focus on receiving the sought benefits of wealth and then seeking to express their identities via their purchases. This inherently pulls people toward focusing on themselves rather than being interested in joining with others to work together on ideals that by nature of being beyond themselves are more abstract and not as materialist specified.

Bovasso, Jacobs, and Rettig (1991) found that morals have become more inward focused over time, and Jensen (1995) found this individualistic focus to be higher among younger adults. The materialism that is so closely linked to this individualism is found by Derber (1996) to fundamentally alter all spheres of social life in America, including political interests. Putnam (2000) cites increased television watching to be at the root of increased materialism that undermines civic engagement. At the very least, youth who spend a great deal of time watching television simply do not have as much time to be engaged meaningfully with fellow people and therefore do not have as much practice over time as previous generations in interacting collectively. Arnett and Jensen (2002) found support for this in discovering a highly individualized religion among emerging adults. Therefore, even this seemingly collective behavior-oriented practice of previous generations is altered to more personalized belief systems.

Hypothesis 5: Emerging adults participating in NSYR interviews who are politically disengaged will demonstrate high levels of individualism and materialism.

Related to materialism and individualism is the study of trust and hope as convictions and systems of beliefs, which have implications for interest or lack of it in political activities. Arnett (2000b) found that emerging adults

tend to have high hopes for themselves and their own futures while remaining highly pessimistic about the broader social world. Kelly (2008) connected youth who believed they could trust in others and trust in society to those who tend to volunteer and participate in political activities. Interpersonal trust, individualized attributions of responsibility, and valuing religion also predicted civic engagement according to Crystal and DeBell (2002). An interest in political activity clearly relies to some extent on both a belief that others within society can be trusted as well as a conviction that positive change can result from civic engagement. Thus, trust and hope are important influencers of political interest. Nevertheless, Rahn and Ransue (1998) examined high school student surveys from 1976 to 1995 and did not find that trust was declining so much as materialism was increasing. However, it is difficult to entirely separate these concepts as an increased focus on the material naturally leads one away from the collective ideals that might connect an emerging adult to the social world.

Hypothesis 6: Emerging adults participating in NSYR interviews who are politically disengaged will demonstrate low levels of trust and hope in being involved with others.

An important domain of beliefs and convictions lies in the realm of moral values. Skitka and Mullen (2002) define a moral conviction as believing that something can be right or wrong, moral or immoral. Moral convictions are often what people cite as their reason for becoming politically involved. Teske (1997) investigated the role of moral convictions for betterment versus self-interested motives in political activists and found that moral commitments were cited more frequently as the reason they believed they needed to act. Muhlberger (2000) found that moral motivation results in differences in political involvement, and Skitka and Bauman (2008) saw that voting behavior was linked to moral convictions. Moral convictions were found to be linked to a belief in respect for humanity, which led people to participate in community-oriented behaviors (Youniss & Yates, 1999). Moral reasoning and an understanding of the political domain are seen by Lonky, Reihman, and Serlin (1981) as capabilities that are held in tandem. Both stem from principled thinking skills in which people are able to discern what they believe on a particular topic and make a choice between options.

Hypothesis 7: Emerging adults participating in NSYR interviews who are politically disengaged will demonstrate low moral-value convictions.

Therefore, social scientific explorations of political engagement among emerging adults need to take into account the levels of materialism or individualism, trust or distrust, hope or pessimism, and moral convictions and capabilities for principled thinking. The questions for the current study informed by these investigations are then to what extent do emerging adults express interest in civic engagement (Hypothesis 1), and what explanations do emerging adults provide for their interest or lack of interest in political participation? The combination of these studies indicate that the potential explanations provided for this interest, or lack of interest, in political involvement include behaviors and practices including participating in close family connections with family members who are politically involved, civically engaged friendship or social ties, voluntary associations, and religious services (Hypotheses 2-4). The research also indicates the possibility of belief and conviction explanations, such as idealism, collectivism, trust, hope, and moral convictions (Hypotheses 5-7).

Method

Data

As described by Smith and Denton (2005), the NSYR is a nationally representative longitudinal survey that began with a phone survey in 2001 with randomly sampled English- and Spanish-speaking adolescents aged 13 to 17, with an 81% response rate ($n = 4,161$). One of the parents or guardians of each of these adolescents were contacted for a telephone survey, which was completed with a 96% response rate ($n = 3,235$). A stratified quota sample of 267 of the telephone-survey teen respondents were then interviewed for an average of 2 hours. In 2005, the English-speaking original survey respondents, then aged 16 to 21, were recontacted for a second wave of data collection with a 329-question phone survey with a 78% response rate ($n = 2,604$). In-person interviews were also reconducted with 122 of the original interviewees, replicating the stratified quota sample. In the third wave of data collection, conducted in 2008, the original respondents, now aged 18 to 24, participated in the survey for an overall Wave 1 to Wave 3 retention rate of 77.1% ($n = 2,532$). In-person interviews were also conducted with a stratified quota sample of 230 telephone respondents, 158 of who had been interviewed in prior waves and 71 of whom were interviewed in person for the first time. The current analysis focuses on the 230 Wave 3 emerging adult in-person interview respondents and includes information regarding Wave 3 interviews, Waves 1 to 3 survey responses, and Wave 1 parent responses for these

respondents. Interviews respondents represent a broad array of emerging adults. Because this sample generally emulates the broader nationally representative survey sample, the interviews and findings described in this article can be assumed to roughly emulate a national snapshot for this age group. However, the interview respondents were not randomly selected from within the survey respondents and tend to slightly overestimate minority races and ethnicities, socioeconomic status backgrounds, and religious affiliations.

Measures¹

This analysis provides a combination of qualitative interview transcript and quantitative survey analysis by linking Wave 1 parental survey responses with Waves 1, 2, and 3 adolescent and emerging adult survey responses, and with Wave 3 emerging adult interview responses. The qualitative analysis focuses primarily on coding for the politics section of the in-person interviews, especially in response to the following questions: "How do you feel about politics in general?" and "do you consider yourself to be a very 'political' person?" Combined responses to this question are treated as the qualitative outcome variable, and all other forms of data are employed toward providing explanations for the responses provided. The potential explanatory variables considered in this analysis are responses to a host of parental involvement, youth engagement, and youth moral-value questions.

Measures for how close emerging adults feel to their parents are measured by responses to the following question: "First, how close do you feel to your (mother/father)?" (asked separately for each of the mother and father). Responses to the following question were also examined: "Generally, how well do you and your (mother/father) get along?" Talking to parental figures about personal subjects was measured by responses to the following questions: "How often do you talk with your (mother/father) about personal subjects, such as friendships, dating, or drinking?" and "How easy or hard would it be for you to talk with your (mother/father) about personal subjects, such as friendships, dating, or drinking?"

The parent-involvement questions pertain to a number of activities, including politically oriented participation. They include responses to a political party-orientation question: "When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as (a) very liberal, (b) somewhat liberal, (c) middle of the road, (d) somewhat conservative, (e) very conservative, or (f) you haven't thought much about this?" Political activities are measured by responses to the following question (read separately for each option): "In the past 12 months, have you (or your spouse/partner) (a) contacted a political official; (b) attended a

political meeting or rally; (c) participated in a protest, march, or demonstration; and (d) participated in an organized project to solve a community problem?" Voting behavior for parental figures was measured by responses to the following question: "In national political elections, do you always vote, sometimes vote, occasionally vote, or never vote?"

Friendship ties to political friends were measured by responses to the following question: "I would like you to think of your closest friends, up to five of them. They may be from your school, neighborhood, family, a religious congregation, work, wherever, but should not include your parents. Just to keep them straight, I would like you to tell me the first names of up to five of your closest friends, then I will have some questions about them. Is (friend's name) involved in any political activities, other than student government?"

Adolescent forms of other types of engagement behaviors were measured by survey responses (for all waves whenever possible) regarding volunteering, religious attendance, and all activities engaged in outside of school. Volunteering activities were measured by all three wave responses to the following question: "In the past year, how much, if at all, have you done organized volunteer work or community service?—never, a few times, occasionally, or regularly." Other organized activity participation was measured by Wave 1 responses to the following question: "Please tell me, are there any regular, organized activities you do after school or in the evenings? During the day? On the weekend?" Religious service attendance was measured by all three wave responses to the following question: "Do you attend religious services more than once or twice a year, not counting weddings, baptisms, and funerals?—never, a few times a year, many times a year, once a month, two to three times a month, once a week, and more than once a week?"

A generalized feeling of trust or distrust was measured by Wave 2 responses to the following question: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or would you say that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Would you say that (a) most people can be trusted, (b) you can't be too careful, or (c) it depends?" Moral-judgment questions were measured by responses to two questions, one pertaining how they would decide right and wrong and whether they believe there is a final right and wrong. The exact wording to these questions is as follows: "If you were unsure of what was right or wrong in a particular situation, how would you decide what to do? Would you most likely (a) do what would make you feel happy, (b) do what would help you get ahead, (c) follow the advice of a parent, teacher, or other adult you respect, or (d) do what you think God or the scripture tells you is right?" And "some people say that morals are relative, that there are no definite rights and wrongs for everybody. Do you agree or disagree?"

Analysis

The outcome measure throughout the study consists of emerging adult qualitative descriptions of their political involvement. The binary and typological coding schemes described above are analyzed across the background characteristics and hypothesized explanatory variables described above. These explanatory variables are a combination of quantitative data and qualitative data. The current analysis assumes that quantitative and qualitative data are not as separate as often assumed in other studies and instead treats interview responses as able to be counted and quantified and survey responses as able to be qualified with more in-depth information. Thus, the analysis moves back and forth between each type of data and uses both forms to provide a comprehensive picture of emerging adult political involvement. Where appropriate, chi-square tests are employed to test the statistical significance of correlations, and all qualitative data were analyzed by coding transcripts of interviews using Atlas.ti.

Findings

Prevalence of Civic Disengagement

Are emerging adults political? Using a simple binary coding of answers to the response measure (“Do you consider yourself a political person?”), the majority—59%—said they did not consider themselves to be political. Yes to this question was coded broadly, accepting a yes response regardless of how the actual political activity was defined, which typically included watching the news on television. Considering that in summing this number I counted their offering any evidence of being political—however minimal it was—as a “yes, they were political,” this number actually significantly underestimates the extent of political detachment among emerging adults. Thus, most of the 31% of interviewed emerging adults who counted themselves as political relied on very minimal standards by which to make that judgment—hardly the kind of activity that makes one imagine a politically involved person.

The second phase of the analysis categorized the responses in greater detail. Analyzing the qualitative interview data resulted in a total of six types of responses to the political-person question. Two of the types were those who rate themselves as a political person. These responses I grouped into two different types: semipolitical and political. The remaining four types include a categorization of the nonpolitically interested. These responses I categorized as follows: apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, and disempowered.

Political. A small handful of cases fell into the political category. A total of 10 interviews (4%) were grouped in this type because emerging adults expressed clear interest in and participation within the political system. Unlike the categories to follow, these emerging adults expressed knowledge of political matters, interest in participating, and specifically described ways that they are civically engaged. Emerging adults in this category were highly atypical of their cohort and could clearly articulate their interest and engagement in political matters. They tended to describe themselves as “very political,” “politically engaged,” and “very interested in politics.” One emerging adult went so far as to say, “I love politics.” They named issues that they were interested in, such as “government spending,” “social policies,” “abortion,” “poverty,” “gay marriage,” “renewable energy,” “the war in Iraq,” and so on. The following excerpt from Lisa,² age 20, demonstrates an exchange in this group:

I: Do you consider yourself a political person? How do you feel about politics in general?

R: I feel pretty political and informed and curious.

I: How would you define yourself politically if you had to? Would you say you're more conservative, liberal, something else?

R: Liberal.

I: What does that mean for you?

R: I'm more socially liberal in terms of wanting to distribute the wealth. Things like welfare and Medicaid. I think that if your needs are met then you should help others meet them. It shouldn't—you shouldn't be—it's the taking from the rich and giving to the poor sort of thing. I think there's a lot of people who have a lot more than they'd ever need. With people starving, that's a travesty to me. I would define myself as liberal in terms of placing the good of the whole above the good of the individual sometimes.

I: Are there any social or political issues that you especially care about, either globally or in the U.S.?

R: Yeah, especially within the medical field and things that affect just a person's ability to have general well-being. Allocation of resources in that sense and immigration.

Another example of this group is the following exchange with Chuck, age 23:

I: Okay. How do you feel about politics in general? Are you a very political person?

- R: Yeah, I mean, I definitely keep up with it. I used to volunteer for campaigns and stuff when, yeah, so, . . .
- I: So you said you are a conservative republican?
- R: Yeah, yes. I mean, I always stay up. I always know what's going on typically. Even my family—it's kind of funny. I make fun of my mom because she doesn't know people that represent us. She knows who the governor is, she doesn't know—she knows who the president is. She doesn't know cabinet members or anything like that, which to me is kind of funny because I know most of them.
- I: Those people do a lot of stuff.
- R: Yeah, exactly. So, I mean, people like always ask me questions, just knowledgebase stuff, so yeah, I mean, I keep pretty much on top of things kind of.
- I: Are there any social or political issues that you especially care about?
- R: I guess, in some ways I care about issues lot more than some people do, but there's no one that stands out. I mean, I just—I guess I have a pretty high—I guess I care about a lot of things, but nothing in particularly stands out.

These emerging adults tended to describe themselves as liking to be a part of things, as believing that it is important to pay attention, have a voice in politics, and as generally informed about the main political issues. Some also expressed being involved in politics because they were deeply concerned about the current state of things in the United States and wanted to help create change. As Shawn, age 21, said, "I have serious worries. It scares the hell out of me." Another—Teneesha, age 18—said, "I think I care about like almost all of them [political issues]. Because it's my future, and the people here now, well my generation, we're the ones that have to really take over the world and whatever. And if it's not gonna be adequately prepared for us, then it's a lot; you have to worry about everything."

Semipolitical. The vast majority of those marked political upon great inspection actually fell within a category more aptly named semipolitical. This group comprises 27% of the total sample and is nearly evenly split between male (46%) and female (54%) participants. Emerging adults in this group expressed some interest in politics, but it was not as clear how or if they were actually civically engaged. These emerging adults frequently use the word "somewhat" to describe their involvement and seem to generally be more on the fence between wanting to be involved and not. For example, a typical response to the political-person question was simply "sort of, not really," or "yes and no."

Emerging adults in this group express that they sometimes vote, but seemingly only in political elections, and only when they find the election to be particularly interesting. They describe themselves as informed because they watch television and frequently explain that they are political because they will stop to watch if they are flipping through channels and come across a debate. Many of the emerging adults in this category describe themselves as “nosy” and say they are political because they like to know what is going on, similar to reading a magazine to keep up on what is happening in various actor or movie star lives. For example, Christina, age 20, said, “We complain about it [politics] all the time, but we don’t even vote. We’re too busy voting for American Idol. I think I heard 97—what did I hear?—97 million people voted for American Idol. [Laughs]. Oh my gosh! If politicians only sang.”

In general then, this group was less definitively politically involved but expressed at least some interest or belief that being involved was something that people should do. These emerging adults frequently use the word “somewhat” to describe their involvement and seem to generally be more on the fence between wanting to be involved and not. For example, this emerging adult stated, “I always say I’m not political, but then when I talk to people about stuff I guess I’m more political than I think I am.” In general, it seemed as if these emerging adults participate in some political events somewhat sporadically and may become engaged on particular topics or in particular elections. However, overall, it is less clear whether they will be still politically engaged once that specific interest has subsided.

Apathetic. In contrast to the somewhat and politically involved emerging adults, the remaining 69% of emerging adults interviewed described themselves as being completely uninvolved politically. I here describe the four categories into which these uninvolved respondents fall: apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, and disempowered. This grouping of responses is the largest of the politically disengaged types of responses and reflects a total of 27% of the respondents. Thus, the semipolitical and the apathetic-sounding respondents were the largest groups of respondents of the entire set of interviews and comprise a combined 54% of the total respondents. Apathetic respondents were nearly equally likely to be female (54%) and male (46%).

The apathetic political-interest responses reflect the typical response expected for a person who truly does not care and is completely uninterested in the topic of politics. The emerging adults in this category express a state of nearly perfect indifference with regard to the topic of politics and do not display any motivation for being or becoming interested in civic life. They give short responses to the entire political section of questions and respond to the political person question with responses such as “I don’t pay attention to politics at all,” “I don’t keep up with politics at all,” “I ain’t interested in

politics,” and “I don’t really follow the politics deal.” For the most part though, it was difficult to even hear more than a minimal response to the entire political-involvement set of questions among these respondents. One emerging adult—Anthony, age 18—typifies this group in the following exchange:

I: How do you feel about politics in general? Are you a very political person?

R: Naw.

I: Do you pay attention to like politics and world and national events?

R: No.

I: No. What would you say your own political position is?

R: You say what again?

I: What would you say your own political position is?

R: I don’t have one.

I: You don’t have one, so you wouldn’t consider yourself to be republican or democrat or conservative, liberal?

R: Naw.

I: Are there any social, political issues you especially care about?

R: No.

Nearly all the responses given to any of the questions asked in the political section for interviews in this category were short, sometimes only one-word answers. The respondents seemed to want to move on from the topic as quickly as possible. For example, one emerging adult exchange with Carlos, age 19, went as such:

I: So how do you feel about politics in general? Are you a very political person?

R: No, not really.

I: So do politics or world or national events interest you?

R: That’s the same answer still?

I: Is—does it interest you?

R: No, not at all.

I: So what would you say your own political position or view is?

R: I don’t really care about it.

I: So can you—would you consider yourself to be more conservative or more liberal? Or nothing?

R: Nothing.

I: Nothing. Are there any social or political issues that you especially care about?

R: No.

Interview after interview for respondents in this category went nearly exactly the same way. The only slight variance heard within this group of categories was a minor elaboration from time to time regarding why these emerging adults do not care about political topics, such as in the following exchange with Peter, age 20:

I: How do you feel about politics in general? Are you a very political person?

R: Not really.

I: Do national or world events or anything interest you?

R: No, not really. I just don't really have a huge sense about the world activities at all, but world events don't really interest me. I'd say I watched the world's stock market more than I do the world events.

Overall, emerging adults in this category told interviewers that politics did not interest them at all. Emerging adults could articulate interest in a number of other topics and would expand on their responses a great deal when we covered other, nonpolitical, grounds. However, when it came to the political section, they said that world and national events simply were not something that they care about. They described politics as something they did not find important, and they repeatedly said the words "I don't care" and "it's boring."

Uninformed. A similar but slightly different set of interviews were categorized not as apathetic but as uninformed. The uninformed respondents comprised 13% of interviewed emerging adults. The break down of these respondents across gender was 61% female and 39% male emerging adults. These interviews shared many commonalities to the apathetic interview responses. The emerging adults in this group tended to provide relatively short responses to the questions regarding politics. They also tended to say that they did not care about or were not interested in anything political. However, the one major difference in this set of interviews is that uninformed emerging adults stated explicitly that this was a result of the fact that they did not know enough about politics to be engaged. Their responses tended to express the following type of exchange with Enrique, age 19:

I: How do you feel about politics in general?

R: I really don't know that much about it.

I: Are you a very political person or not really?

R: Not really.

I: Do you pay attention to politics and that kind of thing?

R: No.

I: What would you say your own political position is? Do you think you're conservative, liberal, something else?

R: I don't know.

Other typical responses to the politically involved questions are similar to Emma's, age 22, response, "I don't watch much TV, so I don't know very much about political stuff." The interview followed up by asking if the respondent would consider herself liberal or conservative, and she said simply, "I don't even know." The interviewer then asked, "Are there any social or political issues that you especially care about or pay attention to?" And she replied, "Social issues like in the world? I don't know." These emerging adults repeatedly said, "I don't know nothing about it," "I don't even know what that means, really," "I don't know. It's one thing I've never really put a lot of emphasis into learning about," "Honestly, I don't know. I'm not sure;" and "I really don't know that much about it." When asked what his own political position is, if anything, Dan, age 21, said, "I don't know. I just don't go that far into politics to know. I don't have much knowledge really to say anything about it." Emily, age 18, said she was not politically involved "because I don't really understand it." She says that she took a political science class that she did not understand and says, "So with me not understanding it, and taking so many classes, trying to understand, I just don't pay attention to it." Another emerging adult—Cynthia, age 18—similarly describes her lack of political involvement this way by saying, "I have no idea. I tried really hard to listen to it all, but it wasn't enough inside my head, but now I just couldn't understand."

One somewhat humorously expressed exchange with Madison, age 19, went as such:

I: Are you a very political person?

R: I'm politically opinionated, but not well politically educated. I'm one of those annoying people that like has an opinion before I know anything or before I know everything, so I'm not gonna lie.

I: What would you say about politics? Like do you consider yourself a political person?

R: No.

I: No, okay. That kind of stuff interest you at all?

R: No. I kind of watch it. If there's nothing on, I look at it.

The emerging adults in these interviews repeatedly said the words “I don’t know” and sometimes said they thought they should be more politically involved but simply did not know how to find out more information about it. However, it is worth noting that though some of these cases do seem like genuine instances of a lack of knowledge, at other times it seems that these cases are highly related to the previous set of interviews. There certainly is some overlap between cases of emerging adults who do not care because they do not know and those who do not know because they do not care to be informed. Nevertheless, in the vast majority of these responses, it was clear that an interest in politics may be possible should this emerging adult have more access to information about civic life. For these emerging adults, it seemed that the interview process itself made them more aware of their reported desire to know more about the topic, and in a handful of cases, some uninformed emerging adults expressed some sentiments that sounded a bit like remorse or guilt that they did not know more than they already do on the topic. This is exemplified by Sarah, age 20, who said, “I’m not as educated on all the issues as I could be,” and another stated, “I should be more involved in it, only because I should know more about our country. But I’m not very involved at all.”

Though this grouping is the second to smallest grouping of the politically disengaged, this category appears particularly important for social activists who are interested in motivating further involvement in political activities, as it seems that the primary obstacle for this group of emerging adults is their lack of knowledge of or exposure to political issues. Presumably, they could become engaged if someone were to inform them further of how to access information regarding issues that they could potentially learn about and with which they might become interested.

Distrustful. The second to largest of the politically disengaged is a third grouping of apolitical emerging adults, a category labeled distrustful. The distrustful group of apolitical emerging adult consisted of 19% of the total respondents, comprising the second largest apolitical group and third largest group overall. The distrustful group was literally split 50%-50% between male and female respondents. Emerging adults in this group tended to give more elaborate answers to the political questions and often seemed to know a great deal about politics. However, they remain unengaged and express their reasoning for this lack of participation as stemming from distrust of the political system or politicians. Ethan, age 22, expressed this by saying, “I mean I pay attention. I watch the news sometimes and just basically see what’s going on. But I just think a lot of them, the majority of them, are just corrupt. They’re just out there trying to make as much as they can as quick as they can and

completely care less about the whole situation.” A typical exchange in this category proceeded like the following exchange with Nia, age 18:

- I: How do you feel about politics? Do you think of yourself as being a very political person?
R: Oh, no. I hate politics.
I: Is there any particular reason why you hate them?
R: I hate it because I don't like how they put people in power. I don't feel like a person like that should have power over a whole community, like the mayor had power over a whole community. I don't like any of that. Even with the president, I don't like it. President has the power to send people to Iraq to fight, but nobody in your family goes to Iraq. Everyone's safe. You're sending other people. We're all equal; we're all humans. I don't like that, having someone above you. I don't like that.

As this excerpt demonstrates, many emerging adults in this group seemed to know more about political events and institutions than the previous two groups. They often gave seemingly passionate responses to the interview questions and could easily describe concrete elements of the political system. They seemed to know how to get involved, how to find out information, and generally seemed to care about the topic. However, despite this apparent interest and knowledge, they described themselves as disliking or even hating politics. This dislike seemed to range from responses focused on not liking the idea of authority in general, as in the previous quote, not liking the political system in general, or disliking particular politicians. However, the main commonality across these responses was the expressed distrust in political leaders or the political system. For example, an exchange went with Dustin, age 21, as follows:

- I: How do you feel about politics in general? Are you a very political person?
R: I'm not. I just try not to be too idealistic because when it really comes down to it, probably most politicians are puppets for lobbying groups and special interest groups and stuff like that. Even who runs for president and stuff like that. And it's really just all a game. So it's hard to really be truly passionate about something that you know is rigged. Just puppets on strings.

Emerging adults in this group often described themselves as avoiding politics at all costs or described politics as ridiculous, stupid, something that disgusted them. As this interview with Amy, age 23, shows:

I: How do you feel about politics in general?

R: I think it's all a load of crap. I think that you pick the lesser of two evils. I don't think that any of them actually tell the truth, and even if they are telling the truth they can't back up what they say. They have no actual power to do the things they say they're going to do, on presidential levels. On local levels, I think that the candidates have more of an impact.

I: How do you feel about politics in general? Are you a very political person? Like, do politics or world or national events interest you?

R: World events interest me. Politics do not interest me. I think that there's a lot of things wrong with politicians. Like, all the criticism that they have—that they're liars, that they cheat, they're corrupt—like, they're not really helping our society as much as they are putting a barrier between, like, corporate and blue collar.

Scott, age 21, described bluntly his distrust for other Americans, stating: "We're too partisan, and then we're too fear driven now. Also, people trust politicians. The American people, I just hate how they trust politicians." He then goes on to describe his distrust for politicians by saying, "So if they have no chance in hell, then that's probably because they're telling the truth. If they wanted to win, they would lie their asses off." Thus, emerging adult interviews in this group demonstrated levels of distrust in politicians, the political system, and other civic participants as the reason that they were not interested in being civically engaged. Though generally informed on political issues and even seemingly impassioned about the topic, these emerging adults seem hindered from political involvement by their pervasive distrust.

Disempowered. The final category of apolitical, emerging adult responses share a number of similarities with the distrustful group. This group of disempowered emerging adults consisted of 10% of the total respondents. They were much more likely to be male than female emerging adults, as a total of 72% of the disempowered respondents were males. Emerging adults in this category also seem to be generally informed about political issues and also frequently express themselves passionately on the topic. The primary difference in these exchanges, however, is the focus on not being politically involved because they do not believe that they can cause change in the world. Rather than expressing specific distrust with others or the political system in general, these responses reflect instead a sense of disempowerment. A typical exchange in this group of interviews went as such, with Richard, age 22:

I: How do you feel about politics in general? Are you a very political person?

R: I would like to be, but just trying to get into all that politics is just something that I personally think that I can't change. I mean people say that if everyone voted we can make a difference, but then the problem is that everyone is not voting. It's hard to change something so big with so little people. And so I think, politically, I'm really not into politics that much.

Emerging adults in this group often described politics or world or national events as "too big." They said they did not think one person could matter in a system that large. They expressed that they did not think they, or other individuals, would be able to change anything about the political system. They described their opinion as not mattering or not affecting them. Marie, age 21, stated, "I feel like even if I know about it, me knowing about something it isn't gonna change anything anyway." Many emerging adults in this group described staying out of politics as a way to avoid conflict. Not seeing the point in discussing or debating political matters, and seemingly believing that no conversation about politics could exist without conflict, they described their lack of engagement as a way to avoid such negative interactions. This is exemplified by an exchange with Chuck, age 20:

I: How do you feel about politics in general?

R: I'm not a fan of politics, per se. I think it consumes too many people's lives, and I think a lot negative energy's put into it.

I: Are you a very political person?

R: No. I have my own views, and I respect everyone else's views. I'm close minded about politics, personally. That is one thing that I'm almost close minded about, I guess. I don't like to discuss them; I just have my own set of views, and that's the way that it is.

Emerging adults in this group seem to actually have political interests and convictions but choose not to act upon them or express them to others. They tend to describe their political views as personal and state that they are best kept to themselves. Many explicitly state that they do not think they should talk to others about their political views, and this seems to stem from a pervasive belief that talking about politics would not change anything and that participating in the political system is too large, too removed from themselves, and too fruitless an endeavor to cause them to engage in the collective society.

In summary, upon further categorization, the political were those emerging adults who answered yes to the "are you a political person" question and

Table 1. Political Types Descriptive Statistics

Political types	<i>n</i>	%	Cumulative
Apathetic	61	27	27
Uninformed	31	13	40
Distrustful	44	19	60
Disempowered	22	10	69
Semipolitical	62	27	96
Political	10	4	100
Total	230	100	100

Source: National Study of Youth and Religion (2008).

then elaborated in a way that demonstrated they are in fact engaged in civil life. The semipolitical were those emerging adults who rated themselves to be a political person but then went on to elaborate that they defined being political as watching the news or participating in some political events sometimes. The apolitical separated into four categories: apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, and disempowered. The apathetic were those emerging adults who expressed that they did not care about and had no interest in politics. The uninformed seemed similarly disconnected from politics but expressed this as not knowing enough about politics to become engaged. Distrustful emerging adults often knew a fair amount about and seemed generally interested in politics but expressed that they were not involved because they do not trust the political system, politicians, or other American civil participants. The disempowered emerging adults seemed similarly interested in and informed about politics but described themselves as disengaged because they do not believe they, or often any one individual, have the power to make change in the political system. Table 1 shows the breakdown of interviews falling into each category, showing that the overwhelming majority of emerging adults are disengaged from politics. The largest percentage of apolitical emerging adults are not involved because they are apathetic. The second highest grouping are unengaged because they are distrustful, then uninformed, and then disempowered.

Explanations for Civic and Political Disengagement

The third phase of analysis compares this categorization of the political outcome across the potential explanatory measures described previously. Chi-square tests with each measure indicate that there is no observable relationship between the political involvement level and the demographic

measures of parental income, parental educational level, age, race or ethnicity, and religious affiliation type. Chi-square tests were also used to determine whether this outcome related to any of the measures described above. Parental closeness, parental participation, ties to politically active friends, previous or current volunteer involvement, participation in extracurricular activities, and religious service attendance (Hypotheses 2-4) also did not display a detectable pattern with the political-involvement outcome.

The measures that were statistically significantly ($<.05$) related to described political engagement were gender, materialism (Hypothesis 5), trust (Hypothesis 6), and moral relativism (Hypothesis 7). Table 2 displays the measures with statistically significant relationships. Of the apolitical, the apathetic and uninformed emerging adults were more likely to be female respondents, while the distrustful and disempowered were more likely to be male respondents. The semipolitical were slightly more likely to include women, while the handful of political emerging adults were nearly all men. Trust has previously been described as having a key role in the explanation for lack of political engagement described by an entire category of respondents.

The overwhelming majority of emerging adult respondents were categorized as materialist (68%). Nonmaterialist comprised 28% of the sample, and anticonsumerists constituted a mere 4%. When comparing this categorization to the political person described previously (political, semipolitical, disempowered, distrustful, uninformed, and apathetic), the relationship is clear. Eighty percent of the anticonsumerists are political or semipolitical, and 66% of the nonmaterialists fall in one of the two politically involved categories. None of the disempowered or apathetic political categorizations fell within the anticonsumerist grouping. The disempowered were more likely than the other three forms of political disengagement to be nonmaterialists, supporting that these emerging adults tend to see, understand, and care about political problems but do not believe they have enough efficacy to create change in the broader society. Only 14% of materialists fall into one of the two political categories, with only 1% falling into the fully political grouping. Ninety percent of those who are apathetic are materialist, and 86% of uninformed, 84% of distrustful, and 71% of disempowered are also materialist. This is compared sharply to the fact that only 32% of semipolitical and 20% of political fall into the materialist grouping.

The political and semipolitical were more likely at Wave 1 to disagree that morality is relative. The distrustful and disempowered apolitical emerging adults are nearly equally likely to agree as disagree that morality is relative, but the apathetic and uninformed emerging adults are highly likely to agree that morals are relative. At Wave 2, the question was asked with additional

Table 2. Statistically Significant Explanatory Measures for Political Interest (Row Percentages)

Political types	Gender ^a		Materialist ^b			Morality Relative 1 ^c				Morality Relative 2 ^d			
	M	F	A	N	M	A	D	SA	A	U	D	SD	
Political	90	10	20	60	20	30	60	0	50	12	25	13	
Semipolitical	47	53	10	58	32	32	68	8	37	0	22	33	
Disempowered	72	28	0	29	71	45	55	2	55	0	30	5	
Distrustful	50	50	2	14	84	34	57	3	37	2	41	12	
Uninformed	39	61	4	11	86	61	39	0	70	0	20	10	
Apathetic	46	54	0	10	90	51	43	3	56	0	32	6	
Total	50	50	4	28	68	42	53	6	47	1	30	16	

Source: National Study of Youth and Religion (2008).

a. Gender: M = male and F = female.

b. Materialist: A = anticommunism, N = nonmaterialist, and M = materialist.

c. Morality Relative Wave 1: A = agree and D = disagree.

d. Morality Relative Wave 2: SA = strongly agree, A = agree, U = undecided, D = disagree, and SD = strongly disagree.

choice (agreed/disagreed and strongly agreed/disagreed). Relatively few emerging adults said that they strongly agreed, and the handful that said they strongly disagreed were in the semipolitical group. The apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, and disempowered groups were most likely to agree that morals are relative. The semipolitical, true to form, were more evenly dispersed between agree that moral are relative, disagree, and strongly disagree. The political were most likely to say that they disagreed that morality is relative.

The interview transcripts also confirm this relationship, as the majority of emerging adults say that morals are relative, and the majority are not politically involved. The most typical type of response to the interview question regarding the existence of right and wrong is exemplified in the following exchange with Sam, age 19:

I: And some people say that there really are no final rights and wrongs in life, that everything is relative, that morality is simply what people make it for themselves. Do you agree or disagree?

R: I agree with that, everyone has their own opinion on what is right and wrong. It is up to them to decide, you know.

In the rarer instances in which emerging adults are willing to believe in the existence of right and wrong, they also are more likely to be engaged in politics. Thus, there appears to be a strong connection between the moral conviction and the desire to engage in collective behavior for change such that those who believe it is up to each person to decide for themselves what to do are less likely to be civically engaged.

Discussion

The political engagement typology indicates that emerging adults approach politics with more or less information, more or less trust of politicians and the political system, more or less sense of efficacy, and more less sense of civic duty. It appears from this analysis that a lack of any one of these characteristics may cause an emerging adult to be uninvolved in politics, thereby tipping the scale toward a majority who are disengaged and a minority who have enough of each of the characteristics to be semi- to fully politically engaged.

An important result of this analysis is the disaggregation of the explanations for a lack of political interest. This categorization revealed that many of those who would typically rate themselves as politically involved on a survey are basing this on the fact that they sometimes watch political events on the news. These semipolitical are actually engaged in a fairly individualized

understanding of politics and rarely explicitly name collective forms of political behavior. The categorization also revealed that among those respondents who would typically rate themselves as uninvolved on a survey there are two primary groups: those who are in fact completely uninvolved and those who actually seem to be more informed and interested in politics than the vast majority of the semipolitical but still rate themselves as uninvolved. The two groups within the former split into those who seem to be truly apathetic and those who seem to be simply uninformed and might possibly become more engaged should they have more education on political matters. The latter of the two primary apolitical groups split into two categories of distrustful and disempowered. Distrustful do not think it is possible to rely on others in the political realm, and disempowered do not believe that they as an individual can affect change in the broader political system. These reasons for not participating appear to be deep-seated hurdles that would not be easily overcome by volunteering or participating in other forms of organized activities. These groups could seemingly only be motivated if they had meaningful experiences within those activities that caused them to gain trust in others and see their own self-efficacy in the world. Those who tend to see this (i.e., the semipolitical and political) seem to be called to action and trusting in others based on their clearer understandings of what is right and wrong in the world.

What explains this dearth of public mindedness and civic and political interest and engagement among emerging adults? The full answer, of course, is very complicated, but this analysis has pointed to a number of contributing factors that tell part of the story of the social causes and deeper cultural and moral meanings of most emerging adults' disengagement from public life. To begin, the part of the civic and political disengagement could be simply an age effect—that is due to their particular place in life as emerging adults. One of the likely reasons that so few emerging adults consider making change in the world a real possibility is that many of them feel nearly overwhelmed with the single challenge of standing on their own two feet. At the same time, we would also be unrealistic if we failed to recognize the honest truth in much of emerging adults' assessment of the state of the world and individuals' ability to influence politics and civic life.

Emerging adults have grown up in a world of seemingly endless scandals, corruption, unfaithfulness, and exposés in the White House, on Capitol Hill, in Governors' offices, on Wall Street, in corporate America, in the United Nations, and well beyond. Their views described above are not mere immature complaining but in fact speak tellingly back to older adults and our larger society about deep, serious problems we have in and about our public institutions. Civic engagement is built on trust and vision and constructive

accomplishment. Yet, those are what America has precious little of in public life today. Emerging adults' opting out of public life and focusing on more immediately rewarding activities is not a completely irrational life strategy. Even so, having said all of that, we think it would be simplistic to declare emerging adults' disengagement from public life to be caused merely by a combination of age effects and a reasonable assessment of the dismal prospects for trust and change in the public square. Other factors are also at work facilitating emerging adults' disconnect from civic life and public affairs. The following text explores some we think are among the most important.

This study finds that the highest levels (apathetic and uninformed) of disengagement are more common for boys and more common for those who say that morals are relative and that they decide right and wrong based on what makes them feel happy and what will help them get ahead. Surprisingly those who say they are not politically engaged because of a lack of trust or disempowerment with the political system are not more likely than other groups to report a general distrust. This is consistent with interviews as it appears to be distrust aimed specifically at the political system that hinders involvement. Distrustful respondents are generally pretty informed about political news and events and appear to keep up on them despite the fact that they do not want to be involved.

The semipolitical tend to have a pretty individualistic sense of what being engaged in politics means. This seems to be mostly defined by watching the news or other political events on television. They seem to be mildly interested, are somewhat engaged, and are potentially willing to become more involved should an event spark their interest. The significant explanation for the difference in their involvement is that they tend to believe that there are final rights and wrongs in life. It appears that this conviction underlies their willingness to engage in the collective and political realms. If emerging adults have come to believe that the only way to be accepting of others is to lose all conviction as a way of allowing everyone to do whatever they think they should, then it appears from this analysis that they also lose their conviction to make a difference in the world and be engaged in collective activity such as politics. When this occurs, they tend to believe that they cannot rely on others for accurate information, cannot trust one another in the political realm, and no longer believe that there is really any way to know the truth. Very many emerging adults today lack the basic cognitive, if not ethical and spiritual, tools for deciding what is genuinely morally right and wrong or what is really good for persons and society. Generally, lacking clear moral convictions themselves, and having typically been socialized not to engage but rather to avoid conflict, few emerging adults feel equipped to participate confidently and constructively in public, civic, or political life.

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Notes

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2. Names and identifying references have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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Bio

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