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"I'm Not a Politics Person": Teenage Girls, Oppositional Consciousness, and the Meaning of Politics

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This article explores U.S. teenage girls' rejections of "politics," arguing that for some girls, the refusal to identify with politics is a discursive strategy informed by their consciousness of inequality and their commitments to social justice. Drawing upon interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, I show how two different groups of girls reflect on their varied experiences of political marginalization as aged, gendered, racialized, and classed subjects in order to develop a critique of the practices and policies of the U.S. government. Building on research on the various and complex meanings of political disaffection, I argue that defining politics very narrowly and then distancing oneself from it can be part of an oppositional political project, and I address myself to the implications and mechanisms of girls' use of this strategy.

"I'm not a politics person," Isis, a 16-year-old Latina[1] from Washington, DC, repeated over and over again to me in our conversations about government, politics, and social change. Her rejection of politics, however, always followed a dramatic and heartfelt outpouring of complaints about U.S. government policies and practices. Isis was full of lively critical analysis of a variety of local, national, and international

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1. All names of girls and organizations have been changed. I selected organizational names; girls named themselves. When referencing girls' racial identities, I use their own self-identifications.

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issues, including U.S. aid to Israel and the bombing of Afghanistan. She was also an active member of a group of teen girls who, working with the Teen Women's Action Program (TWAP), lobbied the board of education to adopt an improved sexual harassment policy. Concerned about animal rights, she was part of a group of students educating themselves and others on this issue in her high school. Clearly, Isis's claim that she is not a politics person does not mean that she does not think about or act in the political sphere. Her refusal of identification with politics was not unique and was expressed on a regular basis by many of the other U.S. teenage girls in this study. Despite having elaborate critiques of systems of power and often being involved in a variety of forms of collective action for social change, these girls repeatedly stated that they were not political people. What, then, does this statement mean? How were girls conceptualizing politics when they distanced themselves from it? And what are the implications of this distancing for their political engagement?

In this article, I argue that many U.S. teenage girls' active refusals of politics are a rejection only of the hegemonic practices and policies of the U.S. government and, for some, are part of an oppositional political stance. Instead of taking girls' statements of dislike for politics as indicators of youth apathy, or as evidence of young women's diminishing feminist consciousness, I show how some U.S. teenage girls deployed the rejection of politics as a tool for political intervention. As various scholars have noted, the refusal to identify with politics should not be dismissed as merely apathy or disengagement, but can be a complicated and rich terrain of political discourse (Eliasoph 1998; Hart 1978; Lipsitz 1970). Building on this insight and this approach to political disaffection, I discuss three particular patterns of girls' distancing from politics, showing how, even as they refused politics, some girls engaged in oppositional political discourse and, in some cases, even overt political action. In contrast to the well-known adult feminist expansion of politics, that is, "the personal is political," the girls in this study allow the term to remain narrow and then refer to their own work for social change by a variety of other names. As I trace out these discourses, I address myself to their implications for girls' critical consciousness and political engagement, suggesting that a discursive strategy of defining politics very narrowly and then distancing oneself from it can be part of an oppositional political project, but one that is not without dangers and negative consequences.

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REIMAGINING POLITICAL DISAVOWAL AND YOUTH APATHY

In recent years, there has been an upsurge of both academic and social concern over the political socialization of youth and levels of youth civic engagement. Anthony Orum writes that political socialization is the process of being "taught the basic forms of thought and action, instructed in the proper behavior, and shown the conventional manner of conduct" (1978, 197). Thus, political socialization emphasizes how youth learn to take on their *prescribed* roles in the state. Having largely defined the political realm in terms of state apparatuses and formal involvement in government and policy, some scholars conclude that girls are either less political than boys or are generally not interested in politics (Hess and Torney 1967; Orum et al. 1974; Owen and Dennis 1988). Diana Owen and Jack Dennis claimed that "females tended to have less interest in politics" (1988, 30). Their study, however, focused only on electoral politics (ibid., 27). Although political socialization scholars have sometimes found girls to be less interested in politics as compared to boys, those who study youth civic engagement have cataloged what they see as a general trend of youth disengagement, including waning civic spirit, lack of political knowledge, and apathy (see Delli Carpini 2000 for a summary of the findings of this literature). Although it has been noted that the picture of youth civic engagement is not so bleak when we include reform movements (Youniss et al. 2002), "unconventional politics" (Metz, McLellan, and Youniss 2003), and community service (Youniss et al. 1999), there is a general agreement in this literature that youth are disillusioned with the state and formal politics.

In several articles and books identifying the crisis of youth apathy, authors make conceptual leaps between findings about youth distrust of government to conclusions about youth disengagement. For example, Ganesh Sitaraman and Previn Warren conclude that youth in the United States have a "dismal commitment to politics" in part from a survey finding that 64% of students do not trust the federal government to "do the right thing most of the time" (2003, 17). Similarly, Michael Delli Carpini's review of the evidence on youth disengagement reports that "in a recent survey, a majority of high school students could not name a single government or non-government public leader who had the qualities they most admired" (2000, 343). While these findings about distrust and lack of admiration are not the only evidence given to prove youth disengagement, they are still seen as a confirmation of this trend.

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Two distinct bodies of literature point to some potential problems with the conclusions about apathy and disinterest found in much of the scholarship on political socialization and youth civic engagement, and they suggest alternative ways to look at girls' distancing from politics. First, numerous feminist scholars have critiqued the standard political science definition of politics as parties, voting, and legislation for relying solely upon a gender-specific view of the male-dominated institution of the state (Bourque and Grossholtz 1974; Elshtain 1981; Jaggar 1983; Pateman 1985) and for excluding the different concerns and political practices of women (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Phillips 1998; Taylor 1999). Feminist political scientist Carol Hardy-Fanta suggests an alternative approach to the study of political consciousness that is useful to those interested in understanding girls' political selves. In contrast to political socialization and civic engagement scholars who focus on assessing young people's knowledge about the state and informed opinions about politicians and the political process, Hardy-Fanta (1993) proposes that political consciousness be understood as an awareness of the power relations present in one's life and community, involving the making of connections between the public and private spheres. Although these broader conceptualizations of politics are not the ones that girls use, this approach helps make visible the oppositional political perspective embedded in girls' rejection of politics.

Second, a long tradition of scholars looking at disaffection from politics has argued that such expressions are not merely indications of apathy or disinterest, but are far more complicated political discourses (see, for example, Hart 1978 and Lipsitz 1970). Several more recent studies have also outlined contemporary patterns of political distancing in the United States. Nina Eliasoph (1998) argues that people's ideas of what counts as politics shift as they move between various contexts and that the avoidance of politics is largely based on a lack of space for public-minded discourse. Nathan Teske (1997) writes that Americans often separate themselves from politics because they see it as a manipulative "dirty game." John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse suggest that some disaffection is rooted in procedural complaints and desires for more voice (2001) and in intolerance for the messy and inefficient aspects of real, as opposed to idealized, democracy (1995). Taken as a whole, these studies point to some of the meanings of political distancing, all more complicated than simple apathy or ignorance. Taking up this project of exploring the fertile terrain of political disavowal with a

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different population (teenage girls), I outline a slightly different mode of distancing than those discussed in these studies—one rooted in critical analyses of power and inequality and in desires for more participatory democracy.

While scholars of political distancing and some youth civic engagement scholars do not condemn people for refusing to identify with politics, they do generally see this as a problem in need of fixing, whether it be through correcting "skewed images of government" (Sitaraman and Warren 2003, 22), civic education aimed at teaching the "barbarities" of democracy and increasing people's patience with government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1996), the rebuilding of the public sphere (Eliasoph 1998), and/or systemic changes aimed at increasing popular inclusion and voice (Hart 1978; Henn, Weinstein, and Wring 2002; Lipsitz 1970). Not all types of disaffection, however, are problems to be solved. For example, women grassroots activists (among others) often identify as political outsiders yet continue to engage in political and social movement activities both within and outside the confines of institutional politics (Kaplan 1997; Naples 1998). As Vivien Hart noted, "distrust is potentially constructive, threatening only to vested political interests" (1978, xii). This article will also demonstrate that *some* types of political disavowal can encourage both critical consciousness and political engagement, and as such, should be cultivated by those interested in increasing democratic participation.

In addition to contributing to discussions around the meaning of politics and political disavowal, this article covers new empirical territory. Many have argued that the dynamics of gender, race, class, and generation shape how people practice and experience politics, activism, and social movements (Cohen, Jones, and Tronto 1997; McAdam 1992; Robnett 1997; Taylor 1996). There has been very little research, however, on the political practices and identities of teenage girls. Although much has been written on feminist generations (Schneider 1988; Whittier 1995) and young women's relationship to feminism (Budgeon 2003; Griffin 1989; Walker 1995), these writings neither discuss those under 18 nor raise the possibility that teenage girls might have a different relationship to feminist politics. Indeed, the invoking of "girl" in these writings generally occurs in debates over the role of femininity and "girlyness" in contemporary feminism (Baumgardner and Richards 2004; Whelehan 2000). Teenagers and their unique experiences of being below the age of majority are left out of these conversations due to the elision of the terms "girl" and "young woman." Meanwhile, scholars of girl-

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hood have focused primarily on other aspects of girls' lives, such as self-esteem and psychology, sexuality, friendship, school and family relationships, media consumption, and subcultural practices (Bettie 2000; Inness 1998; Ladner 1971; Orenstein 1994; Thompson 1995). These works sometimes allude to the political and often describe various acts of resistance, but few have made girls' politics the central focus of study. Those who have written on girls' political selves have found that girls engage in political thought and action in ways that are not readily visible, suggesting the need for more in-depth studies in this area (Bhavnani 1991; Harris 2001).

Scholars of girlhood have argued that it is a distinct social location, different from both boyhood and womanhood (Driscoll 2002; McRobbie 2000). Gender and age structure girls' lives and the social world, and therefore are present in girls' political discourse. The experience of being below the age of legal majority, of not being able to vote, and of navigating this status impacts how teenagers relate to politicians and political spaces. The girls in my study, for example, were all faced with this structural exclusion, but it was not the only force in their political identities. In marking off girlhood as a specific and unique category, I do not claim that it is homogenous. Rather, like womanhood, girlhood is crosscut and bound up with other identity and power differentials. Therefore, as I analyze the patterns of girls' critical distancing from politics, I also discuss some of the implications of these differences among girls. Although this frequently occurs in the form of comparisons between two very distinct research groups—one of white rural girls, the other urban girls of color—differences also exist within each group.

I am not suggesting that the discursive patterns outlined in the following sections are unique to teenage girls; they are not the only people who engage in a politicized distancing from politics. The fact that such a discourse is a major part of some girls' political identities does, however, call into question many of the widespread social and scholarly assumptions about girls' apathy and political disinterest. In highlighting this discourse and the fact that it can be a strategy for critical political engagement, this article not only has implications for the development of youth civic engagement programs and for feminists and other activists aiming to speak to and include girls in their movements and activities, but also suggests a rethinking of the potential utility of narrow definitions of politics and the various meanings of political disaffection more generally.

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DATA AND METHODS

Most studies of youth civic engagement and political socialization have been large-scale, quantitative endeavors. These studies have contributed a great deal to our understandings of the forces shaping young people's political development. However, as Matt Henn, Mark Weinstein, and Dominic Wring observe, "such an approach assumes that a common understanding exists between the researcher and the research participant about the definition and meaning of politics; it is arguable that this common meaning may well not exist and that studies reliant on such an approach may not, by themselves, fully address what (young) people perceive the 'political' to be" (2002, 168). Survey-based studies do not provide the space for participants to put forth their own understandings of politics and, therefore, cannot adequately address the discursive and meaning-making aspects of teenagers' political consciousness (Bhavnani 1991). Given my interest in exploring how girls conceptualize the political, I employed a qualitative, inductive approach. I therefore drew on the tradition of in-depth interviewing in the study of political ideas (Lane 1962; Reinarman 1987; Riesman 1952). In-depth interviewing enables the researcher to study the textures, nuances, and complexities of political consciousness, which, considering both the dearth of research into girls' politics and my interest in analyzing what politics *meant* to girls, made it valuable for this study. Although this style of research allowed me to explore how girls think and talk about politics, it cannot provide the generalizability of large-scale surveys. The range of U.S. teenage girls with whom I spoke are not necessarily representative of all girls in the United States. Nonetheless, my approach aims to provide insights into some of the dynamics of U.S. teenage girls' relation to politics.

I sought to speak to a diverse range of U.S. teenage girls about their political ideas.[2] I conducted multimethod research at two very different girls' organizations: the Teen Women's Action Program, a nonprofit that runs after-school programs and youth organizing projects for girls in Washington, DC (hereafter, DC), and Camp Ashema, an overnight Girl Scout camp in rural New England. These groups represent two distinct approaches to programming for girls[3] and provided me with access to girls

2. This study does not compare or contrast girls with women or boys. Although such systematic comparisons would be very valuable for future research, in this article I explore the dynamics of gender and age by focusing instead on girls' talk about these and other aspects of their identities.

3. Ashema focuses on girls' individual education and self-development, while TWAP encourages girls to work together on collective projects to improve their own lives and their communities.

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from a wide range of backgrounds; they were also selected because I had spent significant time working with both organizations. I worked as a camp counselor at Ashema during the summers of 1996, 1997, 1999, and 2000 and as a trainer and educator at TWAP during the 2000–2001 school year. Through my previous experiences, I established relationships with several girls and staff members at each site.[4]

In the summer of 2002, I conducted six focus groups, 27 individual interviews, and many hours of participant observation at these two sites. Focus groups were held with already existing subgroups within the organizations. Each involved between four and 12 girls; 41 teens participated in these focus groups. Each discussion was approximately an hour and a half in length, and all were tape-recorded and transcribed. Discussions were loosely structured conversations about social issues and political problems I began by asking each group the following question: "What social issues or things going on in the world are you thinking about?" Girls would raise a variety of topics and engage in lively discussions and debates with each other, with little need for further questioning. At times, I intervened to ask follow-up or clarifying questions, and during lulls in the conversation, to ask them about a particular arena (local, state, national, global) that had not yet been discussed. Toward the end of the group discussion, I would ask them to discuss what the terms "politics," "social change," and "activism" meant to them. The intention of these groups was to create a space for political debate, contention, and discussion of ideas. Much of my data on girls' opinions about policy and social problems comes from this setting.

After each focus group, I would ask for volunteers for interviews; 27 teens volunteered and participated in individual interviews. These interviews ranged from one and a half to three hours, with the majority between two and two and a half hours in length. The interviews were designed to explore girls' thoughts on the conditions and contexts of their own lives and their individual experiences with resistance and social change. Interviews were semistructured and open-ended, moving through themes such as school, community, work, popular culture, family, and their experiences at TWAP or Ashema. For each theme, I asked girls to describe these aspects of their lives and to comment on things that they

4. Following the insights from feminist ethnography and critical race studies, I recognize that my location in the social world and my perspectives significantly influence the research process and the text it produces. I have written elsewhere about the intersection of age, race, and gender dynamics, and how being a young-looking (but not teenage) white woman impacted my research at these two sites (Taft forthcoming).

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liked about them and things they wanted to change. Finally, we discussed how they thought such changes could be made and their involvement in various types of individual or collective action for social change. Interviews were also tape-recorded, transcribed, and then returned to the girls for their review.

This study includes girls ages 13 to 19, but most were 15 or 16. The TWAP group included 15 girls who identified as either black or African American, five who identified as Latina or Hispanic,[5] and one who identified as mixed black and West Indian; all 20 of the teens at Ashema identified as either white or Caucasian. Most of the TWAP girls were from poor or lower-middle-income backgrounds, while the Ashema teens came from a wider range of income backgrounds, including both poor and upper-middle-class girls. One young woman at each research site said that she was bisexual, and the rest did not identify their sexual orientations. Three of the TWAP teens were mothers. In addition to this range of backgrounds and identities, this study includes girls with a variety of relationships to social movements and the political realm. Even among the girls who made use of a politicized distancing from politics, there were significant differences in their levels of participation in activism, community issues, or social change. It was not only activist girls or those already involved in social movement activity who took up this particular discourse of disaffection; girls with little or no political involvement also engaged in the critical, politicized rejection of politics.

USING POLITICAL EXPLANATIONS TO REJECT HEGEMONIC POLITICS

During focus groups and interviews, girls at both sites raised a variety of topics and demonstrated a great deal of passion about public issues. They held animated discussions of police harassment, the war in Iraq, the bombing of Afghanistan, international economic inequality, local school funding, media portrayal of girls, and sexual harassment. Many girls were clearly engaged in what Nina Eliasoph (1998) terms "public-spirited conversation." Whenever anyone mentioned the word "politics," however, the girls at both sites actively distanced themselves from this term. The collective process of distancing from and criticizing politics occurred in every focus group I conducted, and many girls made similar refusals in the individual interviews. Therefore, although separating oneself from

5. The girls in this group came from Mexican, Salvadoran and Dominican ethnic backgrounds.

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politics was not universal, it emerged as a strong pattern in both groups.[6] As girls rejected the label "political," I would ask what they meant by politics. The consistent and almost inevitable response was "government." Sometimes girls would be more specific, like Mary-Anne, who defined it as "legislation and congress." Others said "governors, presidents and voting" or "military actions always come to mind when you hear the word politics" or "donkey and elephant." Aphrodite, a 15-year-old African American at TWAP, summed up the general trend by stating, "I just think it's like the president, government, Democrats and Republicans." Although many other issues had sparked disagreement and debate in the focus groups, no girls ever challenged or questioned this narrow identification of politics as government, indicating that it was largely a shared meaning.

Many girls also stated that politics had strong negative connotations for them. It meant "money, lies, secrecy, conspiracy, a whole lot of things that are not good" and "a whole lot of fake people that sit up on Capitol Hill." According to Lisabeth, a 17-year-old Latina at TWAP, politics is just "unnecessary things that don't really help anybody but themselves, the ones that are rich, the ones that are gonna benefit from it. Because the lower people are not gonna get anything from it." Asked about the meaning of politics generally, Lisabeth responded with a criticism of the government, demonstrating how a critical view of the U.S. government slides into negative views on politics as a whole. Several teens also distinguished their own activism from politics, demonstrating that the refusal of politics is primarily a rejection of government. Roxie, an 18-year-old black girl, referring to the DC city council and mayor, said, "I really don't pay attention to stuff like that, like all that politics stuff, there is just no need for me." When I later asked her if she considered herself to be an activist, she told me about her work trying to change foster care regulations. She said, "Yeah, because we fight for what we want." Even though she was actively engaged in making demands of state institutions, in her own terms Roxie was an activist but not "political." Like Roxie, many other girls defined politics in ways that did not even include their own

6. Thirty of the 41 girls made explicit statements of "I don't do politics" or some variation on this sentiment. Significantly, the other 11 participants never stated the opposite claim of "I do politics" or "I'm political." Of the 30 who expressed some kind of political distancing, only a handful did so without ever invoking one of the politicized rationales that I discuss below. Of these, the most common was the position that they don't like politics simply because it is boring. Therefore, the particular discourses of rejection that I outline in the following, while not universal, were certainly common among the teens in this study. Comparing and discussing these other types of girls' political disavowal would be a valuable project, but it is not the goal of this article.

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lobbying of the government. These girls were not distancing themselves from community involvement, social change projects, civil society organizations, or social movements. They often imagined politics as the *opposite* of these other forms of involvement. Kevona said that "politics definitely sounds worse than social change. To me it goes along with the government, it is just a whole bunch of bullshit. . . . But social change is more involved with real people and getting in there and trying to really do something." Not only were many girls' definitions of politics extremely narrow, but they also saw politics/government as a source of social problems and inequality and as distinct from positive social change and democracy.

These quotations make clear that even girls who were involved in activism, social change, and "making a difference" rejected the label of politics. The meaning of politics in this rejection, however, was quite specific and narrow. It would be a mistake to view their dismissal of politics as evidence of civic disengagement, apathy, and/or disinterest.

OPPOSING GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Many girls at both sites said that they were not political because they disagreed with particular government policies. The criticisms of the New England girls tended to be fairly abstract, whereas in DC, several girls connected the policies and practices of the government directly to their lives, indicating some significant differences between the rural and small-town white girls and the urban girls of color. The girls criticized numerous policy decisions and state actions, but I will focus here on a few of the most frequently mentioned. Several of these were present in both locations, including the government's role in producing and sustaining economic inequality. At Ashema, Otis criticized George W. Bush, saying that she read recently "how they are having people pay taxes on like, I forget, but, like in the end, the rich are getting richer and poor isn't going anywhere."

If politics is about "helping the rich get richer," in the words of several teens in both locations, it also neglects the well-being of "normal people." In their comments regarding the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan and the drive toward war on Iraq, many girls took up the position that the government does not care about people at home or abroad, and expressed concern for the lives of "normal people" as opposed to "the government." Roxanne, a white 15-year-old at Ashema, articulated her

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disapproval by saying that the military should only fight "the government and not citizens and people." While the Ashema girls expressed some fear for their own safety, they were primarily concerned with the safety and rights of others. For Mo, in DC, danger felt much more immediate and personal: "I think like, if more people start bombing stuff, who will get bombed? Me, my family, the people I know. I ain't the person who made this all happen, but the people that do, they can take their money and they can go elsewhere. But, it will be like us stuck here to deal with all that." Similarly, the New England girls only rarely mentioned the economics of war. The generally lower-income girls in DC were much more conscious of this aspect of foreign policy. Many of them talked about war in the context of defense spending and the lack of resources in their community. Pooh said, "They spent all this money on the wars and you know, there is people out here that is dying and that are sitting on the street and starving and they can't do nothing about that but they want to send people . . . to fight. . . . That is wrong."

In addition to analyses of how government ignores and injures what they termed normal people, several of the DC girls referred to their own experiences being harmed by government policies as reasons for refusing to identify with politics. As low-income teens of color, a few of whom had been in the foster care system and many of whom had regular interactions with the police and juvenile justice systems, these girls had much more direct negative contact with the state than the more privileged girls in New England, giving them an extensive and detailed critical discourse on the government. For example, referring to the closing of DC General Hospital, Mo said, "I think they closed it down because number one it was for people with no insurance; low income people could go there." Several girls expressed agreement with this, and Mo continued, "The government don't care about the people who have no money, so they are like, they don't want to spend their money trying to have a place where people with no money can go for free, so they are not funding that." Other TWAP teens talked about the challenges of the court system, the difficulty of obtaining restraining orders, the problems in the foster care system, and their interactions with police as indicators of unjust government practices. Sharing stories with each other about white male police stopping them and fondling them, these girls had an acute awareness of how state power can be used in racialized, sexualized, and age-specific ways. Girls connected these experiences, with government programs and the police, to the state and politics and therefore drew

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upon their understanding of these institutions as ineffective, racist, sexist and unconcerned with their well-being when refusing politics. Baddy, a black 16-year-old, summarized this when she said, "The government, I be trying to get away from it, like the police and all." For these girls, the state, and therefore politics, is far from neutral and benign. Although there are some significant differences in how these two different groups of girls related to the state on the basis of their divergent experiences and their race, class, and urban/rural locations, it is noteworthy that girls at both sites criticized U.S. government policies.

By using a narrow definition of politics, girls were able to claim critical political identities without the negative discursive taint of calling their work "politics." Maya, a member of the TWAP group lobbying the school board to change the district's sexual harassment policy, like many of her peers used her narrow definition of politics to help separate her group from the politicians they had been pressuring for over two years. Referring to her work with TWAP alternately as "social change," "advocacy," or "organizing," she told me that she sees what she does as being "the opposite of political." She said that the girls working on this project were "opposed to them, the politicians and the school board." By setting themselves up from the beginning as opposed to the politicians, these girls claimed their own political space, separate from the hegemonic goals and policies of the government. Drawing a sharp line between politics and social change, they were able to engage with the state without being tainted by it. Seeing the government as politics and themselves as distinct from it enabled a discursive separation, allowing the girls to position themselves as outside the systems of compromise. This discourse enabled girls to see their own political work, including institutional political work, as positive, in contrast to a negatively perceived state. Thus, girls' narrow definition of politics can help them to practice a variety of both institutional and extrainstitutional political activities that are safely seen not as politics but as activism or social change. Ironically, this discursive strategy of saying that they are not political permitted some girls to continue to engage with the state.

CHALLENGING POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES

A second discursive pattern in girls' rejection of politics was the sentiment that politics is something done by people who are unlike them. The extent of girls' difference from politicians clearly varies among them:

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Some girls felt excluded in terms only of gender, while others also described the race and class differences between themselves and most politicians. Collectively, they drew attention to the racial, class, gender, and age biases of those who occupy seats of political power by discussing the lack of visibility and lack of representation of women, people of color, youth, and low-income people. This problem of exclusion led to girls' twofold rejection: On the one hand, politics is done by people who are not like them, and so they do not see themselves as political; and on the other, the political system is currently unfair in terms of who holds power, and so they do not want to associate with or legitimate it.

Girls in both New Hampshire and DC spoke of the absence of women in politics and of the class biases of political representation. Roxanne, from Ashema, thought girls should "not be laughed at if they run for president. I think we should be able." For several girls, the image of a female president and the possibility that a woman might be taken seriously in the political realm seemed both distant and desirable. Many girls referenced class differences between themselves and people who do politics, saying such things as politicians are "whoever is the richest and can get the most money." As Billy from TWAP said, "I just think of a whole lot of fake people that sit up on Capitol Hill. Because I live right there and I see all these little Republican guys and girls all dressed up in their suits and like they have on argyles and like whatever. And I see that they just go in and sit there and just get money."

Although gender and class were discussed in both groups, the girls of color in DC were the only ones to mention the racial identity of politicians. Kevona perhaps gave the most limited description of who holds political power, identifying politicians as representing a very narrow segment of society: "It's not even like they are white women, but they are white males in their forties and I don't think that is right, that is not like a fair representation of how life is. It should be like mixed with different people." Located in the particular context of Washington, DC, where the national government is both highly visible and obviously largely white, and the population is majority black, girls like Kevona were quite conscious of the racial hierarchies of the state that supposedly represents them and their community. In contrast, the white girls, as is frequently the case for whites in communities with an overwhelming white majority, rarely discussed or raised issues of race, practicing racial avoidance and participating in a dis-

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course of color blindness (Kenny 2000). Race consciousness was a part of many of the DC girls' relationship to politics, but it was an invisible privilege for the white teens, who tended to limit their analyses to gender and class.

Girls' gender, race, and class commentary points to the troubling lack of representation of women, people of color, and low-income individuals in those occupying the seats of government power. As girls expressed concern with the biases of political representation, they provided a rationale for their refusal of politics rooted in an awareness and critique of differentials of political power. These girls saw that political actors are not people like them and understood this as not a "natural" feature of politics, but as the result of the way political representation is fraught with racial, class, and gender exclusions. In pointing out that primarily wealthy white men occupy the seats of political power, represent people in state-centered political spaces, and dominate as legitimate political actors, girls identified a significant problem with politics. Since "politics" does not include people like themselves, and many girls saw it as exclusive and characterized by major inequalities in representation, it is not surprising that they rejected the label of "political" for their own positions and actions.

As with their comments on particular policies, this discursive thread on the lack of just representation was an expression of girls' oppositional consciousness and analysis of power relations, again indicating that these girls' refusal of politics does not signify a lack of political awareness or political thinking. It constructed them primarily as outsiders to hegemonic politics, but this outsider status was a resistant and sometimes even an activist position. Nevertheless, the girls' focus on exclusion, combined with a narrow definition of politics, potentially undercut their political authority in several ways. First, many of these girls suggested that being legitimate political actors or politicians is, at worst, impossible for them or, at best, something they would not want. Second, this discursive strategy obscures the fact that they *are* extrainstitutional political actors whose involvement matters, potentially reducing their sense of efficacy. Finally, in a context in which girls are rarely seen as political agents, their discourse that they are "not politics people" does little to convince others, be they politicians, scholars, or peers, of girls' potential and actual political contributions. By relying on a restrictive definition of politics and seeing themselves as not like politics people, girls devalue their own political identities and reinforce their invisibility as political actors.

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ENVISIONING DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

In addition to critiques of *who* occupies positions of political power, many girls questioned the centralization of power in the hands of those who purportedly represent them. Extending their critique beyond a politics of visibility of difference, they challenged the functioning and structure of U.S. political systems. Girls at both sites often took the position that political power needs to be shared across the population and imagined a truly participatory democracy. They expressed a strong desire for political voice and argued that those in politics and government do not listen to them, both because of an overall lack of democracy *and* as a function of their age, gender, race, and/or class positions. This discursive thread, combined with girls' narrow definition of politics, helped to strengthen and clarify their oppositional and critical consciousness. While this view encouraged some girls to practice institutional and extrainstitutional politics aimed at creating greater democracy, it also gave others a sense of disempowerment and discouraged them from engaging in institutional politics at all.

Teens at both sites spoke about the influence of money and corporations in the government. Tracey, a white 17-year-old from New Hampshire, said that "a lot of the problems . . . start with the fact that corporations rule like a lot of our government. So, I think that has a lot to do with why the issues don't get out there. It's because the people that are really in charge of saying what needs to be fixed in this country, their campaigns are being funded [by] all the same corporations that are doing the crimes." Others felt that government is simply not responsive to the public. Isis cited antiwar marches as an example of when those in power have not listened to people's concerns: "The government decides, 'okay we are going to bomb.' Then do the people have a say? I saw a lot of people who were rallying, you know, marching, saying 'no war, no war,' and did they listen? No." While these comments on political accountability and public voice indicated girls' concerns with a lack of meaningful democracy generally, many girls based their criticisms in particular experiences of political voicelessness as aged, gendered, classed, and raced subjects. Whether or not girls had attempted to influence government officials, many felt that they were not and would not be heard because of their particular identity positions.

Many girls in both New Hampshire and DC focused on the intersection of age and gender in their struggle to be heard. Tracey said that "it is

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very hard to make a difference because—because of our age and because of the fact that we are female. It is like a double-whammy to get anywhere and have your opinions respected." According to Lamaya, "young women's voices is not heard in DC. And like they think that we are just young girls who don't know what we are speaking about." Maya agreed with this and told me that one of the messages TWAP gives its participants is that "it is not impossible for . . . young girls to make a difference. You know, we are smart and we can make changes. Like we are not like weak and we all have opinions." Being seen as weak and uninformed was raised by these girls as an issue of both age and gender. If women are portrayed as politically ignorant and uninterested, and if young people are seen as politically uneducated and unprepared, then girls are discursively constituted as especially unknowing (Randall 1982, 56). The idea that girls have valuable political opinions is not a part of the general social discourse and not often taken into account by political elites.[7]

Some girls at each site also suggested that their class status imposed a lack of voice in political arenas. In DC, Monique said, "Bush, he's in favor of . . . the poor not really having a say-so in things." In New England, Roxanne said: "We are supposed to have the power, but yet we don't till we are over 18. . . . Then we still don't have a lot of power unless we get a lot of money." Unsurprisingly, as with political representation issues, the only girls to mention race in their analysis of political voice were girls of color. Referring to the lack of communication between government officials and the community, Red said that "especially blacks, they don't tell us anything." Lisabeth also noted racist exclusion, linking it to issues of DC statehood: "[Adult DC residents] can vote, but it doesn't count. . . . There is a reason why they don't let people in DC vote, because at one time, DC was like basically all-black." Lamaya also analyzed a variety of factors shaping her experience of political voicelessness:

> It's hard with like economics and race, and another thing is like ageism. Just because like you are a certain type . . . you can't do certain stuff in the U.S. Like, like okay, we all are minorities, and we are underage, we are under 18, under 21. We are the ones that is rising up, that is coming up for the future and I think it is good if they all could listen to us and hear our voice because all of our voices are really strong. And I think that is one of

7. The lack of belief in girls' political knowledge has been made quite visible to me when, as I tell people about my research interests, I often get responses like "girls have politics?".

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> our major concerns, is like ageism, sexism, economic, your race or whatever. . . . They won't listen to you because you are black and you are a teen. . . . We want to be heard.

Lamaya's comments emphasized the ways that identity and social location heighten exclusion. She described the role of identity in amplifying a general lack of democracy, but then insisted that she and others like her deserve to be heard, making a vibrant and forceful demand for political voice for herself and her peers.

When girls in both groups attempted to practice state-based politics through prescribed, legitimate channels, they did indeed run up against government officials who, they felt, did not listen to them. Their actual experiences reinforced this gap between themselves and what they considered political. The girls claimed that politicians found them "cute" or were pleased they were "learning," but did not take their political claims seriously. Mary-Anne, a white 16-year-old at Ashema, had presented numerous petitions, research, and proposals to her small-town school board, speaking in public on a variety of issues despite a serious speech impediment. She had no success in passing any of her proposals and said she learned that "kids have no say in democracy right now." When I asked her why the school board ignored her, she said: "Because they usually listen to grownups more because they're like voters. . . . And they just think we don't know what's going on and we're just making silly accusations about stuff." The teens in DC who had been working on the sexual harassment policy also spoke to me about how they were treated by the school board members. They were particularly angry about having been referred to as "policy sprouts." Describing one meeting, Maya said "yeah, they was like, condescending us the whole time." As girls struggled to claim political voice in government spaces and were not treated as legitimate political actors, they learned firsthand about how power and inequality operate in state politics.

While the mass media, the government, and civics classes all tell young people that the United States is democratic and that they can influence the decisions of the state, these girls knew otherwise. Committed to ideals of democracy, they believed in their right to participate in and shape the institutions that make decisions about their lives but found that these institutions do not really listen to them. In fact, these girls found that institutional politics, in which they are encouraged to participate by those promoting youth civic engagement, provided them with minimal decision-making power. Therefore, in a certain sense,

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they were factually correct when they defined politics as the actions of the government. Politics, or at least institutional politics, *is* largely done by government actors. By using a restricted definition of politics, they identified where power lies and suggested that the United States is currently insufficiently democratic. Thus, girls' narrow conception of politics can support a critical analysis of the U.S. government.

This definition may have been discursively useful in helping girls expose and make sense of the thin version of democracy in the United States, which they saw as failing to uphold the ideals of meaningful participatory democracy. It had more negative implications, however, for their political engagement. While some girls took their frustration at their lack of voice in stride and continued to practice institutional politics, others gave up on this form of political engagement entirely. Referring to the city council, Red said: "I don't know how they make decisions. I don't want to know." When I asked her why, she said "because they are not telling us what the decision is, so why are you telling us now. I feel as though if you don't ask me, don't tell me later." Because her voice was not heard, Red had little interest in what occurs in the realm of governmental politics. Mary-Anne also suggested that this was the case with many of her friends who do not pay attention to local news. I asked her why she thought that was the case; she replied that it was "because they have like no voice in the town or what is happening in town."

The girls who do not participate in institutional politics because of their belief that they will not be heard may continue to be involved in other forms of political activity. However, if the narrow conception of politics leads girls to see these other, extrainstitutional forms of political action as less significant or meaningful, it could lead to a more total disengagement. Part of the power of a narrow definition of politics is that it positions government politics as the entirety of "politics" and can make people feel that all their other concerns and tactics for change are both unrelated and powerless in its realm (Acklesberg 1988). If girls find that government politics are undemocratic and unapproachable, but see these as the only politics that really matter, then they may be left feeling that there is no way to make the changes they desire. Although this may be the case for some, it is certainly not universal. Many girls had a strong belief in the importance of democratic involvement, and upon seeing the lack of democracy in institutional politics, some felt the necessity for increased political engagement. Using their narrow definition of politics to sustain oppositional and outsider relationships to government and to distinguish their politics from those whose actions they find so unjust,

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these girls both pressured the state to become more responsive and worked to create a variety of alternative, extrainstitutional political practices outside the realm of state politics.[8]

CONCLUSION

The U.S. teenage girls in this article actively claimed that they are not political, but this rejection of "politics" was in fact an expression of their oppositional political stance. Drawing on their various and intersecting gender, age, race, and class consciousness and experiences, these girls criticized the government for its unjust policies, systematic exclusions, and lack of democracy. Then, because they saw the hegemonic politics of the government as the entirety of "politics," they distanced themselves from the term "political." By distinguishing between politics and what they referred to as social change, activism, or simply "helping the community," they positioned themselves as agents of social change opposed to the political mainstream.

Like many older women who are activists, the girls in this study emphasize community and grassroots organizing and alternative spaces for social change outside the state. On the other hand, unlike some older U.S. feminists who claim that "the personal is political" and attempt to expand the definition of politics, these girls engaged in a discursive strategy of refusal. Instead of trying to expand the terrain of politics to include their projects of resistance, they simply allowed it to remain narrow and referred to their own work for social change by a variety of other names. Deploying this narrow definition of politics helped some girls to maintain a critical distance from the state, but it was not without costs: It undercut their authority in state politics and belittled the significance of their extrainstitutional practices. While the feminist expansions of politics could encourage girls to see themselves as legitimate political actors, girls' rejection of the term reminds us that expanding the meaning of "politics" is not the only critical, or even feminist, way to relate to the concept. For these girls, politics is very much associated with the state, not with social movements or projects of resistance. The fact that its narrow meaning is so entrenched for them indicates the difficulties of expanding the term to apply to a more extensive and critical project. Although

8. For more on these alternative political practices, see Harris (2004).

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the project of redefining politics has been occurring for decades, it has not reached the teenage girls in this study, suggesting a need for more meaningful and effective interaction between adult feminists and teenage girls.

There is much to be gained from conversations between teenage girls and adult women over the strategic uses of various conceptions of politics. Older feminists' expanded definition of politics highlights the wide array of oppositional consciousness and forms of engagement that contribute to social change, making women and girls' political agency visible. Girls' narrow conception of politics and discursive strategy of refusal can be part of the development of a critique of the political mainstream and can encourage the development of dissident or "outsider" political identities. These two approaches, not easily reconcilable, are both nonetheless present in political struggle and social movements. The analysis and practice of oppositional politics would therefore benefit from an attention to the dynamics and negotiations between these two conceptions and to the constructed and contested nature of the term "politics."

As well as pointing to the potential value of narrow definitions of politics and a discourse of critical disaffection, this article indicates the need for a different approach to youth civic engagement scholarship and programs. Studies of youth civic engagement cannot rely upon self-identification with politics but need to find ways to discuss and explore individuals' complex relations with this terrain. And rather than focusing attention only on the realm of state-based, institutional politics, scholars of civic engagement who wish to understand youth involvement need to look beyond the state to a variety of forms of community action. Civic engagement programs that try to "correct" girls' critical analysis of the problems with the U.S. government, or try merely to include girls in a system that they feel is deeply flawed, are likely to seem simplistic, misguided, or even reactionary to girls with the critical perspectives discussed in this article. Such programs, if they do not address girls' legitimate political concerns and complaints, are unlikely to make much difference in youth political activity. My findings therefore suggest that rather than trying to combat disaffection, those interested in increasing youth political engagement should help youth increase their efficacy as political outsiders *and* work with them to democratize the decisions that affect their lives, creating opportunities for real political voice, not simply token inclusion.

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