

Why Bother? Because Peer-to-Peer Programs Can Mobilize Young Voters

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Introduction

Many assume that young Americans are apathetic, self-absorbed, and indifferent to civic matters. It is a turned-off generation, we are told. But nothing could be further from the truth. A host of data suggests young Americans give their energy, time, and money to their schools, community, and nation. A recent report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), for example, suggests young Americans volunteer at higher rates than do older Americans (Lopez 2003). The frequency of pitching-in has also increased: In 1990 some 65% of college freshman reported volunteering in high school, and by 2003 that figure had risen to 83%. Rates of volunteer work for those under 25 are now twice as high as for those over 55. Perhaps *this* is the activist generation.

Today's youth activism is both perplexing and a bit disconcerting, however, as it does not extend to political involvement. The decline in election turnout among young Americans has been stunning. In 1972, when 18 year olds were first granted the right to vote, nearly 50% did so. In the 2000 election only about 35% of this age group went to the polls. During the 2002 midterm congressional elections a scant 20% of this age group turned out. Youth voting (18–29 year olds) increased to 51% in 2004, as reported by CIRCLE, but few would sug-

gest that we are out of the woods with low rates of youth political engagement.

Moreover, the problem runs much deeper than nonvoting. The same report finds the rate of participation for younger Americans at similar or higher levels than that for the overall population for every type of volunteer organization *except* those political, such as political parties. Here the rate of participation is just one-third the overall rate. According to the American National Election Study, published by the University of Michigan every two years, the number of young Americans (less than 25) "very much" interested in campaigns stood at roughly 30% from the 1950s to the 1980s. Since then, the decline has been steady and by 2000 this figure had dropped to just 6%. In 2002, 67% of all Americans cared "very much" or "pretty much" about the outcome of congressional elections in their area. Just 47% of those younger than 25 felt the same. The withdrawal of young citizens from politics has been rapid, deep, and broad.

Some might suggest young voter withdrawal is an expression of contentment, and thus no big deal. Arguments refuting this perspective stretch from the theoretical to the pragmatic. Surely Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, made good sense when he noted, "Democracy is a collective venture that falters or flourishes depending on the efforts citizens invest in its behalf" (2002, 14). As for pragmatic implications, the departure of a generation of Americans from the electoral sphere will have a profound influence on the outcome of elections, as the presidential race in 2000 demonstrated. Many would agree with University of Maryland scholar William Galston that the "withdrawal of a cohort of citizens from public affairs disturbs the balance of public deliberation—to the detriment of those who withdraw, and to the rest of us as well." Yes, a generation removed from politics *is* something to fret about.

What Can Be Done?

Much effort has been spent searching for the root of youth withdrawal from politics and on finding solutions. Most

have assumed that the decline is due to changes in attitudes. Increased levels of apathy, cynicism, and alienation are often dubbed the culprits. Although negative attitudes exist in individuals of all ages, young peoples' mistrust of politics "has translated into a reduced tendency to vote" (Patterson 2002, 89). One of the authors of this study has also suggested that changes in mobilizing institutions (local party organizations) are partly to blame (Shea and Green 2004). As political parties neglect young people, they are further driven away from politics.

Still another line of inquiry has focused on changes in civic education. High school programs have "traditionally been seen as mechanisms by which young people can be socialized to more participatory lifestyles" (Eagles and Dennis 2001, par. 2). Yet, only 64% of young people ages 15 to 26 report they have taken a high school course on civics or American government (Kurtz, Rosenthal, and Zukin 2003). A report by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (2003), for example, found that one-third of high school seniors lacked a basic understanding of how government works. The solution, then, is to better tool the young citizen for civic life. Indeed, many high school and college programs have been developed to promote knowledge, interest, and involvement in politics. MTV's *Rock the Vote* is based on the logic that more information and a greater sense of efficacy can spur involvement.

Studies have shown that high school level civics programs can improve political knowledge. Niemi and Junn, for example, found that while the effects are modest, civics curriculum taken by high school seniors does "enhance what and how much they know about American government and politics" (1998, 147). They found a 4% increase in "overall political knowledge attributable to the amount and recency of civics coursework" and suggest the influence of civics education on civic knowledge is "above and beyond individual motivation and family socialization influences" (148).

But will more traditional courses prove to be a panacea? Two studies in the early 1990s painted a "very disturbing picture" of the failure of civics *classes* in America

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(Cogan 1997). While civics education may be able to better socialize students into the democratic processes, it seems that they are not as effective in creating participatory citizens. These reports conclude that “this generation is ill-prepared to keep democracy alive in the 1990s and beyond” (22). In fact, many of the students interviewed “cited their poor civics education as a primary reason for their apathy” (22).

The problem, many speculate, may well be in the content of these courses. A report entitled “The Civic Mission of Schools,” by the Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE (2003), illustrates how the curriculum of civics courses has become diluted. The standard civics class only describes and analyzes government “in a more distant way, often with little explicit discussion of a citizen’s role” (14). The authors of the report suggest that “teaching only rote facts about dry procedures is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from political participation, such as voting” (20).

Peer-to-Peer Learning

Beyond enhancing the content of traditional courses, another innovative avenue for reaching young citizens in recent years has been peer-to-peer learning. Boud, Ruth, and Sampson define this process as “teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher” (1999, 414). The goal is to train a contemporary or near contemporary to introduce a curriculum (Irish et al. 2003). Among the many benefits often attributed to peer-based learning are the development of skills related to collaboration, a deeper level of reflection and exploration of new ideas, and the relatively modest costs for such programs. While the research on its potential to engage students in civic life is a bit sketchy, some studies suggest peer-to-peer programs can prove effective (see, for example, Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik 1982).

Helen Sonnenberg Lewis (1962) examined the “peer-associated determinants of adolescents’ feelings of political competence and interest in political participation” (as cited in Orum 1978, 222). These are two characteristics that are likely not acquired directly from parents, so they can be strongly influenced by peers. Her evidence shows that young people who interact and work with others their age are more likely to express political competence and interest in political participation. By simply interacting with peers in an organized setting, young people are more likely to become involved in politics.

There is some contemporary evidence that young people working to engage other young people in the democratic process have the effect of increasing political participation. Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King (2003) conducted a study of the Michigan Democratic Party’s outreach to young voters. Known as the Michigan Democratic Party’s “Coordinated Campaign” of 2002, they focused on the future of the party as well as the state of young voters. This “Youth Coordinated Campaign” (YCC) that was led by the party’s newly formed youth caucus reached out to 98,000 voters between the ages 18–35 through 24,000 phone calls, 14,000 door knocks, and 60,000 door hangers. It is important to note that the majority of the volunteers involved in this effort were young themselves, usually under-30 year olds from colleges or high schools. The post election results illustrated that the 18–35 cohort had turned out in greater numbers than in past elections. In 1998, they were 9% of the electorate, while in 2002 they represented 17%.

Another technique with great potential is called “super-treatments,” or intensive voter education seminars. Donald Green and Alan Gerber have researched and written extensively on the impact of various voter mobilization techniques, and are optimistic about super-treatments. In their path-breaking book, *Get Out The Vote* (2004), they mention one program aimed at high school seniors in five Connecticut schools. In the program, small groups of high-school seniors were given brief, intensive voting seminars stressing the importance of voting and giving the opportunity to register to vote and cast a mock ballot using an actual voting machine. The seminars produced a statistically significant 14% rise in turnout. They write: “Looking at the effects of ‘super treatments’ represents an important new frontier in this line of research” (93).

Why Bother? Our Peer-to-Peer Civic Engagement Program

The Center for Political Participation (CPP) began working early in the summer of 2004 to design a peer-to-peer curriculum to encourage high school seniors to get involved in the political process. A youth-friendly program called *Why Bother? The Importance of Voting in America* was created by Allegheny students Adam Fogel and Sarah Schmitt. It took the form of a PowerPoint presentation that delivered exciting animations and images, popular music, important historical information, and current-events examples to motivate young adults to get

involved in politics. By answering the question “Why Bother?” the goal of the program was to allow college students to explain to high school students how their generation can have a voice in the political process.

Why Bother? covered five elements during a 45-minute presentation. First, it addressed how political issues can directly affect young people. For example, they learned about young activists in Seattle who reversed an ordinance that limited their access to popular music concerts. Second, to combat the notion that “all candidates are the same,” the program discussed key party differences in the 2004 election. Third, it provided examples of how a small number of votes can decide an election—particularly in swing states—as the 2000 presidential election demonstrated. Fourth, the presentation moved to a discussion of the rights and obligations of citizens in a democracy, and finally it explained the mechanics of voting; how to register and how to pull the levers in the voting booth (the mechanism used in northwestern Pennsylvania in 2004). Roughly 15 minutes of presentation time was saved for questions and answers.

From September to October 2004, the presentation was given to 468 students at eight different high schools in northwestern Pennsylvania. Four college students were trained to give the presentation—and each did so at two different high schools. Great care was taken to ensure that material was presented the same way at each school (an exact script was carefully constructed, for example).

Testing the Effectiveness of the Program

Part of the purpose of the *Why Bother?* program was to test the effectiveness of super treatments. Would college students be able to effectively encourage high school students to get involved in the political process? We designed a split-half experiment to measure behavioral and attitudinal changes. Two groups of students were established at each school—an experimental and a control group. Great care was taken to assure that there was no systematic bias regarding the types of students in the different groups. For example, the “best kids” were not selected for the treatment.

Shortly after the 2004 election we returned to six of the participating high schools to survey student political attitudes and behavior. An exact survey was administered to both groups in each school. In all, 370 students participated in the written post-election survey.

Table 1
Results of *Why Bother? The Importance of Voting in America* Peer-to-Peer Curriculum

	Experimental Group	Control Group	Not Sure	Total
Respondents	166	179	24	369
Male	95	77	10	182
Female	71	101	14	186
Grade 11	3	31	7	41
Grade 12	163	148	17	328
Age 16	2	22	4	28
Age 17	96	98	15	209
Age 18	66	56	4	126
Age 19	2	2	0	4

Note: *Why Bother? The Importance of Voting in America* is a curriculum created by Fellows at the Center for Political Participation, Allegheny College.

Responses to behavioral and attitudinal questions were then compared to ascertain the effects of the presentation. Given that the selection of the groups was random, any differences could be attributed to the treatment.

The survey asked students about several areas of political behavior. We asked students: to gauge the amount of attention they pay to politics, hoping to find that the presentation had increased student awareness and consumption of political news; how much they and their family follow politics; how much they discussed “the election or politics” with their family and their friends; if they had tried to persuade someone to vote a certain way this year; and if they were registered and if they voted in the election.

In terms of attitudes, the subjects were asked questions about their feelings toward government and elections. Did they believe that government pays attention to what young people think, and how much difference do they think young people can make in elections? We also asked them how often they could trust the government to do the right thing.

Findings

Of the 370 respondents, nearly one half (45%) heard the presentation. Our sample was 50% male and 50% female, with 89% of the students classified as seniors. Thirty-four percent of the respondents were over 18. For a description of respondents see Table 1.

significance .090). Of the registered students, those in the experimental group were much more likely to actually vote than were those in the control group; 74% to 58% (Chi-square 7.853, signifi-

Both behavioral and attitudinal differences were detected between the control and the treatment groups. (Likely due to the small sample size, most results did not quite reach statistical significance—as noted below). Results for behavioral measurements are presented in Table 2. We found that eligible students in the experimental group (51%) were more likely than students in the control group (38%) to report that they were registered to vote (Chi-square 4.810,

cance .097). Put a bit differently, those who took part in our one-hour presentation were roughly 40% more likely to go to the polls than those who did not (provided they were eligible and registered).

Students who heard the presentation (44%) were more likely than the control students (34%) to report “quite a bit” of discussion with their friends about the election. Behaviors apparently unaffected by the presentation were likelihood to discuss the election with family and likelihood to persuade someone else to vote a certain way.

In terms of attitudes, here too the presentation seems to have made a difference. Students who heard the presentation expressed higher feelings of political efficacy than those in the control group, as noted in Table 3. Students in the experimental group (59%) were more likely than students in the control group (44%) to share the opinion that government listens to young people “a good deal of the time” or “some of the time.” Put another way, students in the control group (56%) were more likely than students who heard the presentation

Table 2
Behavioral Differences
Results of *Why Bother? The Importance of Voting in America* Peer-to-Peer Curriculum

	Experimental Group	Control Group	Not Sure	Total
<i>Behavioral Differences Difference</i>				
<i>Registered to Vote</i>				
Yes	44 (51%) 13%	31 (38%)	3	78
No	42 (49%)	51 (62%)	9	82
	86 (100%)	82 (100%)		
Not eligible	79	96	12	187
<i>Voted</i>				
Yes	46 (74%) 16%	30 (58%)	3	79
No	16 (26%)	22 (32%)	2	50
	62 (100%)	52 (100%)		
Not eligible	104	127	19	250
<i>Discuss Election with Friends?</i>				
Quite a bit	73 (44%) 10%	61 (34%)	6	140
Some	62 (37%)	88 (50%)	16	166
Not Much	24 (14%)	23 (13%)	2	49
Not at all	7 (4%)	6 (3%)	0	13
	166 (100%)	178 (100%)		
<i>Discuss Election with Family?</i>				
Quite a bit	58	62	7	127
Some	55	73	10	138
Not Much	45	31	6	82
Not at all	7	13	1	21
<i>Persuade Someone to Vote a Certain Way?</i>				
Yes	90	102	15	207
No	76	75	7	158

Note: *Why Bother? The Importance of Voting in America* is a curriculum created by Fellows at the Center for Political Participation, Allegheny College.

Table 3
Attitudinal Differences
Results of *Why Bother? The Importance of Voting in America* Peer-to-Peer Curriculum

	Experimental Group	Control Group	Not Sure	Total
<i>Attitudinal Differences Difference</i>				
<i>Does government listen to young people?</i>				
A good deal	27	14	1	42
Some	71	64	9	144
	98 (59%) 14%	78 (44%)		
Not much	62	98	12	172
Not sure	6	3	2	11
<i>Can young people make a difference in elections?</i>				
A good deal	104	114	15	233
Some	53	52	7	112
Not much	8	9	2	19
Not sure	1	4	0	5
<i>How much of the time can you trust the government to do what is right?</i>				
A good deal	22	22	1	45
Some	100	98	11	209
Not much	42	53	9	104
Not sure	2	6	3	11

Note: *Why Bother? The Importance of Voting in America* is a curriculum created by Fellows at the Center for Political Participation, Allegheny College.

(41%) to feel that government does not pay much attention to what young people think. Attitudes unaffected by the presentation concerned youth political power and trust in government. Over 90% of both groups felt that young people can make a difference in elections, and the majority of students in both groups (over 70%) felt they could trust the government to do the right thing at least some of the time.

Conclusion

Practitioners, scholars, and those generally concerned with the state of civil

society are searching for explanations for the decline in voting, and for potential solutions. Our research suggests peer-to-peer programs and “super treatments” can encourage civic engagement in younger populations. By combining peer influence with civic education, the *Why Bother?* program provided a convincing rationale for greater involvement. Especially encouraging is the ability to teach young people the importance of voting and the ways in which they can make a difference. The *Why Bother?* program not only changed behavior, but it instilled new attitudes about the ability of young people to make their voice heard in government. Clearly, we expect these

attitudinal changes to lead to lasting behavioral changes based on new perceptions of youth efficacy in politics.

We might note an unexpected rationale for undertaking such projects. The college students that were pulled into the development, implementation, and analysis of the project expressed excitement about the endeavor. While there was certainly a self-selection bias at work (that is, more “political” college students are more likely to get involved in such a project), we suspect their interest in the voting process was enhanced by their involvement. Our guess is that many peer-to-peer programs provide similar ancillary benefits.

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Appendix 1

Survey Instrument for Why Bother? Test.

Circle your information

Grade: _____ Age: _____ Gender: Male Female

Circle or mark the response which best describes your answer

Allegheny College students made a presentation on voting to a number of classrooms in the area, entitled "Why Bother? The Importance of Voting in America."

1. Did you see this presentation? Yes No Not Sure
2. On average, how much do you pay attention to politics in the news?
 A good deal Some, depending on the issue Not much Not at all
3. How close do you and your family follow politics?
That is, are you a strong fan, weak fan, or not really a fan of politics?
Myself: Strong fan/loyal Weak fan Not really into politics Not Sure
My Family: Strong fans/loyal Weak fans Not really into politics Not sure
4. Have you discussed the election or politics with your *friends* lately?
 Yes, quite a bit Some, depending on the issue Not much Not at all
5. Have you discussed the election or politics with your *family* lately?
 Yes, quite a bit Some, depending on the issue Not much Not at all
6. Have you tried to persuade someone to vote a certain way this year? Yes No
7. Are you registered to vote? Yes No Not Sure Not Eligible
8. When it comes to voting, we understand that some people cannot always find the time to vote or they may not be able to vote for some reason. Which of the following *best* describes you in this recent election?
 Yes, I was able to vote
 No, I could not find the time or something came up
 I am not old enough to vote
9. Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what young people think?
 A good deal Some Not much Not sure
10. How much difference can young people make in elections?
 A good deal Some Not much Not sure
11. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government to do what is right?
 A good deal Some Not much Not sure