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A GENERATIONAL MODEL OF YOUTH'S ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICS

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Youth in contemporary Anglo-Saxon democracies are less engaged in politics than their adult counterparts. This article puts forward that contemporary youth are characterised by progressive individualist values of democratisation and individualism that correspond to the instability and uncertainty of late modernity. To test this proposition, linear regression models are applied to World Values Survey for four study countries – Australia, the USA, Britain and New Zealand. The results show that the conventional civic engagement model does not explain why contemporary youth are less engaged in politics than adults. The index of progressive individualism developed in this study, however, does diminish the impact of age in determining variation in political engagement. Although further research is needed to confirm progressive individualism is a generational characteristic of contemporary youth, this study suggests that increased flexibility in the practice of politics is warranted to reflect the lived experience of young citizens in late modernity.

Youth's record of low engagement in politics has earned them a reputation for apathy. Researchers who study the relationship between age and political engagement are driven by the question of why youth consistently engage in politics at a lower rate than adults. The ultimate motivation of such research is to re-democratise the political space by strengthening youth's political voice to be equal to that of adults. Whether founded in reality or not, youth's perceived apathy impacts the extent to which political decision-makers consider youth's concerns when creating policy. This affects the health and robustness of contemporary Anglo-Saxon democracies. To shake off the image of apathy and increase their influence on political decision-making, youth must engage in politics through visible modes of political expression.

In this work I test my theory that youth are engaged in politics at a lower rate than adults because of their interaction with late

modern social and political structures. Youth is interpreted as the starting point of new generations. Spurred by wider societal activity and change in social and cultural spaces, new cohorts of youth develop original consciousnesses that impact on their behaviour and identity. This impacts their interaction with various facets of social life, including political engagement. Drawing from Mannheim's notion of internal time, Pilcher writes that people "are crucially influenced by the socio-historical context that predominated in their youth: they are fixed in qualitatively quite different subjective areas…each social generation has a distinctive historical consciousness" (Pilcher, 1994: 490). If each generation is shaped by a unique economic, social and political environment, the reasons for youth's relatively low engagement in electoral politics may be distinct for each new generation.

A seminal text in explaining youth's engagement in politics is Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) where he argues that youth's low motivation to engage in politics is an effect of their low engagement in civic life. Putnam's empirical work compares the early twentieth century and baby boomer generations. Putnam argues that intercohort change generated society's retreat from civic and political engagement. Rather than individuals changing their habits, likes or dislikes, society had experienced a slow and subtle turnover of generations, where the new generation was not as engaged in civic life as the preceding generation. It is difficult to reverse intercohort change since individuals generally do not adopt new tastes and habits (Putnam, 2000). Intercohort change emerges when new generations, which increasingly represent a greater portion of society, introduce new values and norms. Putnam's work shows that the decline in civic and political engagement is a consequence of social growth which appears to be beyond the power of the individual. This study takes hold of the idea that different generations engage in society and politics in different ways and searches for what may differentiate the late modern generation from the baby boomer generation.

A generational understanding of youth's engagement in politics examines how historically specific social, economic and political structures influence contemporary youth's engagement in politics. In late modernity, youth's interaction with education and employment structures is highly fragmented and democratised.

Youth perceive their development as independent and autonomous because they undertake individualised projects of risk assessment (Beck, 1999) and self-actualisation (Giddens, 1991). This leads to a proliferation of 'progressive individualist' values among youth. Because youth experience life through individualised and fragmented structures, their evaluation of collective political action as a vehicle for social change is substantially compromised.

New conceptions and experiences of time and space in late modernity have given rise to new and unique social structures. In his work on New Capitalism, Richard Sennett theorises that the contemporary annihilation of durable (linear) time is a direct consequence of economic restructuring (1997). Constant movement within the workforce prevents social bonds such as trust, loyalty and obligation from developing. Effectively, this unravels the social and civic dimensions that support one's development of one's own identity (Sennett, 1997). Youth, who are most vulnerable to the effects of late modernity, respond to the uncertainty of unstable social structures by engaging in individualistic 'reflexive' biographies (Beck *et al.*, 1994). This means that individual young adults are responsible for assessing their own exposures to risk in the social, political and economic structures they interact with. By encouraging individualistic values, late modernity disrupts youth's development of shared political identities.

Casualisation of the workforce has encouraged education structures to become more fragmented and flexible. The social consequences of increased education in the 1980s do not mirror those of liberalised education in the 1950s and 60s. Late modernity frames education as an instrument through which to acquire human capital. Education is a risky 'investment', which will need to attract returns on the job market (Becker, 1975). The shift in the framing of education has led to competitive and individualistic development, consequently giving rise to values of individualism and democratisation. The marketisation of education in late modernity has also encouraged individualism by diversifying or fragmenting courses and disciplines (Coffey, 2001). In contrast to the 1960s, this has led students to perceive their social and intellectual development through education to be separate to that of other students. The unique generational experiences that arise

from developing in specific historical environments influence how youth engage in the political arena.

I argue that late modernity, experienced through new social and economic structures, has given rise to values of progressive individualism. Progressive individualism encompasses a range of values revolving around notions of individualism, creativity and democratisation of political and social structures. Widespread individualism among youth is generated by late modernity's emphasis on self-actualisation (Giddens, 1991) and individualistic 'reflexive' biographies (Beck *et al.*, 1994). Individualism stunts engagement in electoral politics because individuals perceive change and risk management as individualised projects. Late modernity teaches citizens to be responsible for shaping their own lives rather than collectively creating social change.

Individualisation encourages citizens to break down the social barriers that restrain complete self-determination and individual empowerment. Although Beck writes that "there is no guarantee that the democratisation of decision-making…will necessarily improve the quality of decisions" (1999: 131), a destabilisation of vertical power-structures and authority allows individuals to feel more in control of their responses to uncertainties. Creativity and innovation are values of progressive individualism because they diversify the responses individuals can consider in managing their exposure to risk.

The rise of progressive individualism may have attracted its image of apathy. Society's (and youth's in particular) greater access to information resources has led to a wider spectrum of issues and consequently modes of political engagement (Dalton, 2008). As Todosijevic *et al.* (2000) write, because 'classic' political issues such as the redistribution of wealth are at the core of official party politics, citizens who give priority to self-actualisation, aesthetic needs, global responsibility and full scale democratisation engage in a new and unconventional performance of politics (Todosijevic *et al.*, 2000). Because new politics do not dominate electoral politics (Zukin *et al.*, 2006), the disengaged attract an image of apathy. This essay focuses on engagement in electoral politics because while the products of electoral politics have a real influence over lives, it is important to understand reasons for disengagement. Understanding this puts us in a better position to assess what

changes could be made to synchronise the political framework with modes of engagement in politics and political behaviours.

This study first tests the strength of the civic engagement model in explaining why contemporary youth and adults engage in politics at different rates. It then investigates whether the instability and fragmentation of late modern economies has given rise to a new generation which is progressively individualistic and consequently disengaged from engaging in electoral politics. Progressive individualism is conceived as generational because youth, as developing citizens, are most influenced by the fragmented, unstablised and individualised structures of late modernity.

Methods and Data

This study uses World Values Survey (WVS) data to evaluate civic engagement versus progressive individualism models of youth engagement in politics. The overarching aim of the WVS is to examine the changing values, beliefs and practices in the social and political lives of up to ninety percent of the global population. A standardized questionnaire is distributed to representative populations across a possible ninety-seven societies. Each national sample contains data for about 1000 respondents. For this study, data from third (1994-1999) and fifth (2005-2008) WVS waves are extracted for Australia, the USA, Britain and New Zealand. Although the WVS is relatively well-standardised, there are gaps and constraints when comparing countries and years.

In this study, data are recoded specifically for analyses of trends in political engagement across age groups and countries. 'Age' is a pivotal variable prepared for all analyses of data. The 'youth' category of age encompasses respondents between 18 and 25 years of age. The 'adult' population is capped at 55 years old to minimise the effects of retirement (such as more free time, radically different material incentives and different interests in political issues). Three new indices, engagement in politics, civic engagement and progressive individualism have also been created for this study.

The engagement in politics index (EP_index) measures how politically engaged a respondent is by computing the sum of the respondent's engagement in five possible electoral political actions. In the broader literature, engagement in politics encompasses a

virtually endless array of behaviours, values, attitudes and skills. As Henn et. al. (2005) write, the boundaries of politics are unique to each researcher, respondent and reader. As previously mentioned, electoral politics are the focus of this study because while they have a real effect on the lives citizens, universal engagement in politics is a critical component of a robust democracy.

This study computes an EP_index score computed for all respondents by allocating one point for every separate type of political activity they have performed. Activities include expressing an interest in politics (EP1), petitioning (EP2), boycotting (EP3), demonstrating (EP4) and political party membership (EP5). Voting has been omitted because study countries have inconsistent policies on mandatory voting. Ranging from zero to five points, the EP_index score gauges the respondent's level of engagement in politics. Rather than qualitatively asking 'how', the EP_index simply asks 'whether' respondents engage in domestic politics.

The civic engagement index (CE_index) is a measure of the magnitude of respondents' involvement in civic life and is used here to test Putnam's theory of civic engagement. A CE_index score is calculated for all respondents by computing the sum of their level of social trust (CE1) and the number of civic groups in which they are active members. These groups include religious (CE2), sports or leisure (CE3), trade union (CE4), artistic, musical or educational (CE5) or consumer (CE6) organisations.

Progressive individualism, as a set of values, is difficult to operationalise because of constraints in available data. The progressive individualism index (PI_index) assembled for this study attempts to measure the extent to which respondents' values and views of social and political structures reflect those associated with late modernity. The ten indicators chosen measure progressive individualism by tracing themes such as individualism, creativity, democratisation and autonomy. These indicators show whether the respondent believes free elections are an essential feature of democracy (PI1), believes the protection of civil rights against oppression are an essential feature of democracy (PI2), thinks 'democracy' is important (PI3), finds thinking up new ideas and being creative is important (PI4), has used the internet in the last week (PI5), does not attempt to 'behave properly' in social settings

(PI6), does not support a greater respect for authority (PI7), does not support a greater emphasis on family life (PI8), does not continually try to make their parents proud (PI9), does not live with their parents (PI10).

Analyses and Results

Table 1 reports mean engagement in politics (EP_index) scores for Australia, the USA, Britain, and New Zealand by age group. The results confirm preceding research that shows youth are constantly less engaged in politics than their adult counterparts. The difference between EP_index means according to age is always highly significant statistically. Where available, WVS data are also used to examine the relationship between age and political engagement over time. The EP_index means according to age categories for third wave WVS data are listed in Table 2 (below). Apart from Britain, youth prove to have been just as significantly disengaged in politics at the end of last century as they are now.

Table 1
Results of *t*-tests Executed on Youth and Adult EP_index Means of 5th Wave WVS Data in all Study Countries

Country	*Youth (EP mean)*	*Adult (EP mean)*	*Mean Difference*	*Standard Error*	*t-value (df) (critical t=1.96)*
Australia	1.56	1.84	-0.28	0.11	-2.55 (817)
USA	1.32	1.88	-0.55	0.13	-4.14 (804)
Britain	1.06	1.57	-0.51	0.12	-4.27 (610)
New Zealand	1.21	1.97	-0.76	0.16	-4.65 (467)

Table 2
Results of *t*-tests Executed on Youth and Adult EP_index Means of 3th (1994-1999) Wave WVS Data in all Study Countries

Country	*Youth (EP mean)*	*Adult (EP mean)*	*Mean Difference*	*Standard Error*	*t-value (df) (critical t = 1.96)*
Australia	1.53	1.97	-0.45	0.08	-5.72 (1409)
USA	1.48	2.07	-0.59	0.12	-4.78 (919)
Britain	1.37	1.46	-0.09	0.10	-0.89 (654)
New Zealand	1.68	2.06	-0.38	0.12	-3.14 (611)

Britain is the only country which shows no statistical significance of age for the third wave of WVS. Figure 1 illustrates the impact of age on engagement in politics in Britain between 1981

and 2005. The graph shows that adults' slight drop in engagement in politics in 1999 disrupts what would be a smooth transition between waves. The reason for such a noticeable drop in adult engagement could have been the nature of the 1997 general election. Often, citizens will only engage in politics if they believe their actions will have an impact on decision-making. If there is no 'contest' in the political sphere, citizens become uninspired to create change (Catt, 2005). Britain's general election in 1997 saw the Labor party win with a landslide victory to claim the most seats the party had ever held. Possibly due to the lack of contest during this election campaign, political engagement of the adult age category slipped in 1999. Historical rates of political engagement in Britain contrast with the USA's smoother transitions shown in Figure 2. Figures 1 and 2 both show that youth are consistently less engaged in politics than their adult counterpart.

Regression models are used to compare the relative performance of the civic engagement and progressive individualism models of contemporary youth engagement in politics. The results of the regression models for Australia are

Figure 1
Time Series Graph Showing Changes in the Rate of Political Engagement in Britain between 1981 and 2005 for Youth and Adults (WVS 2005)

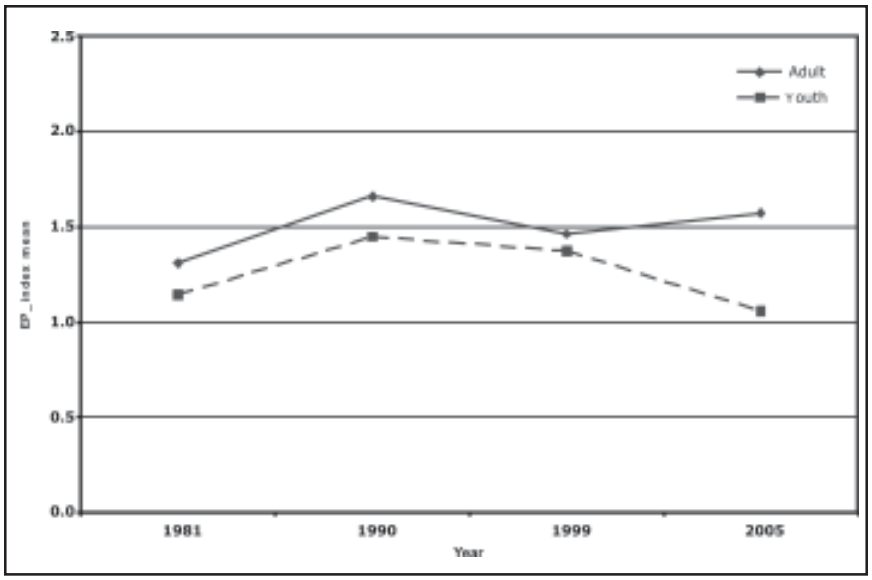
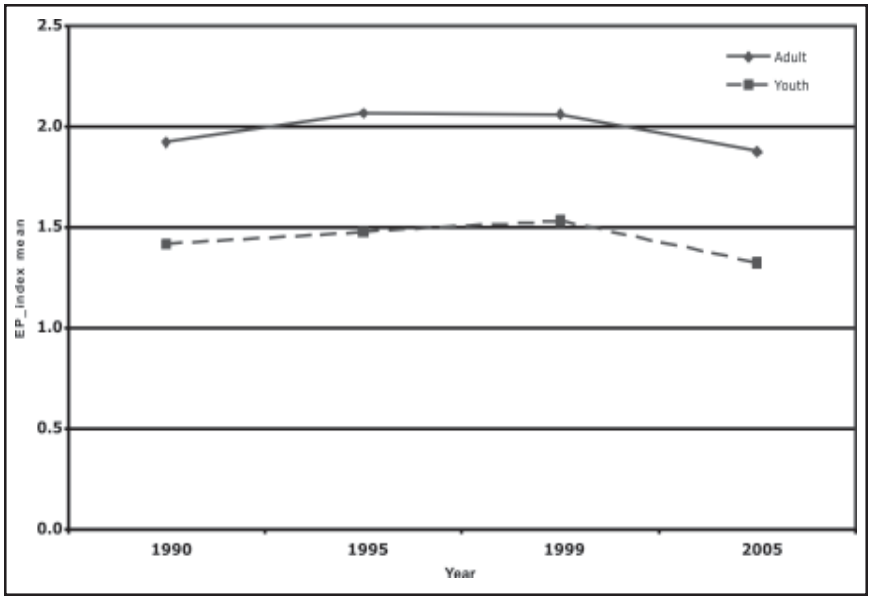


Figure 2
Time Series Graph Showing Changes in the Rate of Political Engagement in the USA between 1990 and 2005 for Youth and Adults (WVS 2005)



summarised in Table 3. The results for Model 1 show that when no other variables are controlled, age is a significant indicator of political engagement. The low R^2 value (1%), however, indicates that age alone explains very little of the overall variability in political engagement.

In Model 2, sex, education and income variables are added as controls.

Model 3 includes the CE_index as an independent variable alongside the controls. Although the CE_index is highly significant in its impact on engagement in politics, it does not explain the age gap in engagement in politics. Instead, when the CE_index is introduced in Model 3, the magnitude of the unstandardised regression coefficient for age marginally increases from -0.39 in Model 2 to -0.40 in Model 3. This indicates that when the CE_index is controlled, the difference in youth and adult EP_index levels actually *in*creases. Controlling civic engagement creates a (slightly) bigger difference in political engagement between youth and adults. This result shows that Putnam's theory of intercohort

change through civic engagement does not explain broader shifts in engagement in politics in Australia in 2005.

Model 4 replaces the CE_index with the PI_index as an independent variable. When the PI_index is introduced, the coefficient for age decreases in magnitude from -0.39 in Model 2 to -0.11 in Model 4. The remaining age gap in engagement in politics after controlling for PI_index is statistically insignificant. Rather than having low levels of engagement in politics because the respondent is 'young', Model 4 shows that low levels of engagement in politics is due to the respondent being progressively individualist.

When the CE_index and PI_index are considered together in Model 5, the PI_index continues to play the greatest role in explaining the difference in engagement in politics between youth and adults. The effect of the CE_index is not as strong when included alongside the PI_index, which shows that progressive individualism is a stronger determinant of engagement in politics than civic engagement. Furthermore, the residual impact of age on engagement in politics in Model 5 is still not statistically significant.

Table 3
Results of Regression Analyses (Models 1 to 5) for Australia using Fifth Wave WVS Data (Dependent Variable = EP_index; n = 698)

Variable	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*
[constant]	1.86 ***	0.73 **	0.76 **	-0.10	-0.06
Age	-0.35 **	-0.39 **	-0.40 **	-0.11	-0.12
Sex		-0.09	-0.10	-0.10	-0.11
Education		0.14 ***	0.12 ***	0.08 **	0.07 **
Income		0.04 *	0.03	0.02	0.01
CE index			0.11 **		0.08 *
PI index				0.27 ***	0.27 ***
R^2	0.01	0.07	0.08	0.20	0.211

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; **p<0.001

The regression models for the USA are summarised in Table 4 (below) and show similar trends to those in Australia. In the USA, the significance of age also decreases when progressive individualism is controlled. Between Models 2 and 4 (in Table 4) the coefficient for age drops by 0.20 units on the EP_index, which is similar to the 0.28 unit drop in Australia. However, because the age

coefficient begins as a larger value (in the USA), age remains significant in all Table 4 models. As in Australia, progressive individualism is much more effective than civic engagement in explaining why youth engage in politics at a lower rate than adults.

When the CE_index is controlled in Model 3, the magnitude of the coefficient for age increases marginally (from -0.50 to -0.52). Compared to results for Australia however, the CE_index coefficient in the USA data is much stronger. This result confirms Putnam's work, which was developed specifically with reference to the USA. Putnam (2000) writes that in America, democracy is strongly rooted in the voluntary organisations that build civil society. It is therefore expected that of all study countries, the CE_index would have the greatest impact on the EP_index in the USA. However, although respondents who are civically engaged are more likely to engage in politics, it is not the case that youth are not as engaged in politics (as adults) because they are not as civically engaged. This is illustrated in the juxtaposition of the CE_index being highly significant in both Models 3 and 5, however having no effect on the magnitude of the coefficient for age.

Even in the USA, then, variation in civic engagement is not able to explain why youth are less engaged in politics than adults. It is only when the PI_index variable is included in Model 4 that the significance of age in determining political engagement declines.

Table 4
Results of Regression Analyses (Models 1 to 5) for the USA using Fifth Wave WVS Data (Dependent Variable = EP_index; n = 693)

Variable	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*
[constant]	1.91 ***	0.45	0.55 *	-0.16	-0.05
Age	-0.67 ***	-0.50 ***	-0.52 ***	-0.30 *	-0.32 *
Sex		-0.17	-0.16	-0.15	-0.15
Education		0.24 ***	0.19 ***	0.11 **	0.07
Income		0.05	0.04	0.05	0.04
CE index			0.24 ***		0.22 ***
PI index				0.27 ***	0.26 ***
R^2	0.03	0.10	0.14	0.20	0.23

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

The regression models for Britain are summarised in Table 5 (below) and show similar trends to those of both Australia and the

USA. The coefficient for age does not show a substantial drop until the PI_index is introduced in Model 4. Although age is still significant in the fifth model, it is only because of the inclusion of the CE_index which, as in both Australia and the USA, mildly increases the impact of age on political engagement. This observation is supported by the absence of statistical significance of age in Model 4, where the CE_index is not included. Both civic engagement (CE_index) and progressive individualism (PI_index) are highly significant in explaining engagement in politics. However in contrast to the effect of the PI_index, the CE_index does not minimise the impact of age on engagement in politics.

Table 5
Results of Regression Analyses (Models 1 to 5) for Britain using Fifth Wave WVS Data (Dependent Variable = EP_index; n = 415)

Variable	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*
[constant]	1.67 ***	0.48	0.57	-0.06	0.07
Age	-0.50 **	-0.49 **	-0.48 **	-0.27	-0.29 *
Sex		-0.05	-0.02	0.01	0.02
Education		0.16 ***	0.11 **?	0.07 **	0.04
Income		0.03	0.01	0.02	0.00
CE index			0.29 ***		0.22 ***
PI index				0.29 ***	0.26 ***
R^2	0.03	0.10	0.16	0.21	0.24

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

The regression models for New Zealand are summarised in Table 6. Although the strength of the PI_index for New Zealand is substantially compromised by being assembled from only three indicators (due to lack of data), the results echo those reported for Australia, the USA and Britain. If the PI_index were to have been applied in its complete form of 10 indicators, a much stronger impact would be expected. Even in its incomplete form, the PI_index has a greater impact than CE_index on minimising the age gap in engagement in politics in New Zealand.

There are two main results of this study's empirical analyses. The first is that age has a significant impact on determining contemporary levels of engagement in politics. This result confirms existing studies which find the extent of youth's engagement in

Table 6
Results of Regression Analyses (Models 1 to 5) for New Zealand using Fifth Wave WVS Data (Dependent Variable = EP_index; n = 407)

Variable	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 3*	*Model 4*	*Model 5*
[constant]	1.97 ***	0.91 **	0.75	0.64	0.46
Age	-0.83 ***	-0.83 ***	-0.75 ***	-0.72 ***	-0.63 ***
Sex		-0.13	-0.11	-0.14	-0.12
Education		0.15 ***	0.12 **	0.15 ***	0.12 **
Income		0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
CE index			0.23 ***		0.24 ***
PI index				0.20 *	0.22 **
R^2	0.05	0.10	0.16	0.11	0.171

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

conventional domestic politics is consistently below that of adults (eg Putnam, 2000; Henn *et al.*, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Odegard *et al.*, 2008; Gordon, 2008).

The second, more provocative finding is that progressive individualism is significantly more effective than civic engagement in explaining why youth are less engaged in politics than adults. Civic engagement, which within the literature is widely recognised to explain political engagement, is always a highly significant marker of engagement in politics (Tables 3 to 6 above). It does not, however, explain the contemporary age gap in political engagement. This flatly contradicts Putnam's argument that youth are disengaging from politics because they are retreating from civic life. Although the effect of age on engagement in politics is not eliminated, the results of this study indicate that it is because progressive individualist values vary systematically by age that there are significantly different levels of political engagement between youth and adults.

Discussion

The results of this study have three important implications. First, this study's analyses of WVS data do not support Putnam's (2000) theory that youth are less engaged in politics because they are disengaging from civic life. Second, respondents who are highly socialised and respectful of authority are more likely to be politically engaged. This raises the concern that contemporary democracies are surrendering their capacity to keep themselves in

check through disruptive politics. Third, youth specifically seem to disengage from politics because they carry progressive individualist values. Progressive individualist values are a consequence of late modernity's effect on employment, education and social organisation. In disembedding, lengthening and destabilising youth's transition from childhood into adulthood, late modernity proliferates values of progressive individualism by placing the onus of self-realisation on each individual young person.

Youth's disengagement from politics is not due to disengagement from civic life.

Putnam (2000) argues that civic engagement is an important cause of political engagement. Model 3 in the regression analyses for all study countries supports this argument by illustrating that civic engagement has a highly significant impact on engagement in politics. However, Putnam (2000) also argues that contemporary political disengagement is a result of intercohort civic disengagement. He argues that new generations are not as civically engaged as preceding generations and projects that as new generations replace older generations, social change of widespread civic disengagement occurs. Accordingly, Putnam argues that youth are less engaged in politics because they are less engaged in civic life. The results of this study, however, find that although civic engagement *is* a significant predictor of political engagement, it *does not* account for the difference between youth and adult engagement in politics. It is not because contemporary youth are less civically engaged than adults that they are consequently less politically engaged. Rather, there is some other factor associated with belonging to 'youth' in contemporary society that stunts engagement in politics.

It is possible that rates of civic engagement in youth and adults are similar, but produce different effects on political engagement due to qualitative differences in civic engagement. In finding that youth are more likely to disengage from politics because they have progressive individualist values, it seems a contradiction that youth continue to engage in civic life. It is expected that greater individualism among youth would catalyse a decline in civic engagement. From the findings of this study, it can be argued that late modernity's fragmentation of linear time induces a different

performance and experience of civic engagement to that of the mid-twentieth century.

Sennett (1997) writes that constant movement within the workforce prevents deep social bonds from developing. Consequently, if youth do engage in a specific civic group, they do so temporarily with self-serving motivators. For example an individual's engagement in religious, sporting, leisure, artistic, musical or educational organisations can easily be framed as the individual pursuing their own interests in a social environment. Civic life is increasingly "obscure[d] as collectivist traditions weaken and individualist values intensify" (Furlong *et al.*, 1997: 2). Consequently, youth limit the depth of their civic engagement because they are constantly influenced by a project of reflexive risk assessment. Future research into values of progressive individualism among youth (developed in this study's generational approach) could indicate the motivators behind contemporary youth's engagement in civic life.

Youth who are highly socialised are more likely to be engaged in politics.

The observed result that progressive individualism is a key factor in understanding youth's disengagement from politics indicates that youth are not as politically engaged as adults because they are dislocated from the socialising forces of family and general social authority. Conversely, this result implies that youth who are more respectful of authority, social norms and parental standards are those who are most likely to be engaged in politics. By this line of reasoning, politically engaged youth can be framed as conservative and highly socialised. The relationship between socialisation and political engagement is examined in the literature on youth's political engagement within the civic engagement framework. McFarland *et al.* (2006) claim that civic groups facilitate processes of social reproduction and social learning both of which socialise youth to engage in politics in a legitimate way. The existing literature on civic engagement, however, does not make the explicit argument that political socialisation 'tames' youth's values and ideas to make them fit into existing political frameworks. Under this interpretation, the process of becoming politically socialised by society involves adopting motives and capacities from existing political agents (whether from within the

family unit or within an individual's community) and engaging in the political game whilst abiding by established rules.

As youth transit into adult statuses they become 'new' citizens with great potential to redemocratise the political space. Democracy is at its most successful when floating subjects, which are deemed invisible by the sensible, empower themselves to disrupt and deregulate the social truth (Rancière, 1999). As new citizens (e.g. youth) acquire legitimate political positions, they pressure the democratic system to reconsider existing policies and ideologies in light of new ideas and values. In this way, democracy should be most concerned with "eliminating [the] floating count" of people whose voices are not represented in the political sphere (Rancière, 1999: 76). Diminishing the 'floating count' should not be achieved by shaping new citizens to fit into political positions already recognized by the political system, but rather by realigning the political system to encompass all political positions occupied. The finding that politically engaged citizens tend to be respectful of authority, conform to social pressure and have a limited exposure to new ideas suggests that contemporary democratic systems are relinquishing a system that is truly 'of the people, by the people and for the people.' Youth's political engagement should be an instrumental strategy in re-invigorating the democratic qualities of contemporary democracies.

The most relevant example of youth (as floating subjects) disrupting the political space is the student upheaval across America, Europe and Australia in 1968. Kevin Mattson (2003) writes that if today's youth activism seems lethargic it is because it exists in the shadow of the 'golden age' of the 1960s, when youth's political engagement experienced an unprecedented surge. The protests of 1968-9, a youth-led phenomenon, came in the wake of mass entry into universities and a new ease of travel for the young middle class (Klimke *et al.*, 2008; Jobs, 2009). The simultaneous occurrence of the two dislocated youth from wider society, exposing youth to new ideas, values and strategies for change and ultimately allowing youth to organise a collective response to their dissatisfaction with politics. Klimke *et al.* emphasise that youth were effective in being noticed and consequently creating a disruption to politics because they were formally organised. Although education and globalisation have continued to move

towards universalism, progressive individualist values that rise out of late modernity prevent youth from re-enacting the political upheaval of 1968.

Progressive individualist values lead to disengagement from politics.

Although increasing numbers of youth choose to continue their education to a tertiary level, the contemporary organisation of disruptive and collective student action does not compare to that of the 1960s. Arguing that universities have stopped new ideas from infiltrating the minds of youth or that youth have experienced a sudden disabler of physical mobility does not solve this contradiction. Rather, the marketisation of education and the growth of a competitive 'human capital' mentality has transformed students' experiences (Furlong *et al.*, 1997). Unlike the 1960s, tertiary education now prepares students for an economy which is highly fragmented, specialised and competitive (Giddens, 1991). In doing so, tertiary education exists as an explicit facilitator of the accumulation of human capital (Becker, 1975). The marketisation of education has increased the number of courses on offer by narrowing the scope of what is taught in individual courses (Coffey, 2001). Consequently, fewer students are making a 'general investment' in education because more students are making 'specific investments' by gaining skills that respond to only a particular firm or trend in industry (Becker, 1975). Investing in specific skills seems unwise if the job market is highly fragmented and unstable, yet Becker argues that this is what is necessary to have the 'cutting edge' on other employees. The consequence of this style of education is that students obtain an individualised perception of their identity, they see each other as competition and evaluate collective action to be too risky.

In being individually responsible for negotiating a risky and independent transition into adulthood, youth of late modernity become individualised creators of change. Accordingly, the results of this empirical study suggest that progressive individualism accounts for much of the age gap in political engagement. Beck *et al.* (1994) and Giddens (1991) argue that weakening social bonds are a consequence of perception rather than reality, as the growth of specialisation actually results in a growth of interdependency. As Beck *et al.* (1995: 40) write "the means which encourage

individualism also induce sameness…. The situations which arise are contradictory because double-faced: individual decisions are heavily dependent on outside influences". This indicates that disengagement from politics in late modernity is not necessarily a natural response to flexible economic and social interactions. With increased individualisation and specialisation, centralised institutions such as parliaments have an even greater role in coordinating fragmented yet also interdependent structures. So in the individualistic world of late modernity, collective action and organisation are not futile and should be encouraged.

Conclusion

This study is motivated by the ever-present project of re-democratising the political space. To disengage from politics is not only to deny oneself a voice in collective decision-making but also to decimate the health and robustness of contemporary democracy. In a world where democracy is acclaimed to be an ideal form of social organisation, studies that investigate how to move towards a more vigorous state of democracy are of tremendous value.

Youth are chosen as a focus population because in their 'new citizens' status, they house great potential for disrupting and re-democratising the political space. The act of considering new citizens and ideas forces the political system to democratize by realigning itself with its active citizenry. In neglecting their great capacity to disrupt and create a democratic political order, youth in contemporary Anglo-Saxon democracies allow their political systems to glaze over the imperative procedure of keeping themselves in check. The answers that arise from asking why youth are disengaging from politics reveal options for re-energizing strategies to encourage youth's engagement in politics.

The results reported here show that because youth are more progressively individualistic, they are more likely to disengage from politics. Alternatively, citizens who are engaged in politics are respectful of authority, respectful of social norms and do not highly regard individual empowerment. Reservations about the framing of this result should be considered. Although it is argued that progressive individualism is a generational trait, the values embodied within progressive individualism could have arisen due to a number of social and economic conditions other than late

modernity. For example where this study frames questioning of authority and social norms as actions which increase flexibility and creativity, cultural understandings of youth development see it as a generic process adopted by all youth. Although progressive individualism is significantly more common among youth than adults, there is insufficient data to prove that the contemporary adult age group did not embody progressive individualism in their youth. It is also unknown whether progressive individualist values will subside in contemporary youth when they successfully complete their transitions from childhood into adulthood.

Apart from executing the quantitative analyses used in this study on other populations (especially non Anglo-Saxon democracies) this study would be enriched by complementary qualitative research. If further research questioned whether youth engage in civic organisations to foster their own interests in an individualistic mentality, the generational model developed in this study would have the potential of understanding why the civic engagement model is no longer successful in accounting for impact of age on political engagement. If youth engage in civic life in a highly individualistic and competitive way, they disrupt the accumulation of social capital which Putnam identifies as necessary in supporting political engagement. The findings of this study would also be strengthened by qualitative research that investigates youth's understandings of the merits or needs for progressive individualism.

If youth are disengaging from politics because of the effects of wider structural changes in the economy, education and social organisation, there is a need for the practice of politics to also react to these changes. Yet the dissynchrony between contemporary youth and politics is exacerbated because as youth become more flexible, uncertain, individualised and disengaged from politics, politics becomes more stable, rigid and institutionalised. To transform the political sphere so that it embodies flexibility and greater empowerment of the individual would be to not only allow politics to become more relevant for youth, but also to allow politics to be generally more susceptible to embracing elementary principles of democratic representation. Particularly in a world where changes in individual lives occur quickly and unpredictably, politics needs to be flexible in its response.

The onus of change lies with both contemporary Anglo-Saxon governments and their citizens. Governments need to become more accountable, transparent and responsive to citizens just as citizens must pressure the political system to democratise. Making politics more relevant to the experiences of citizens in late modernity increases the possibility of citizens, particularly contemporary youth, engaging in politics. Employing strategies that emphasise increased interdependence in a time of individualism would revalidate the merits of collective empowerment and determination and in so doing give rise to a robustly democratic polity.

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