

# CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SIMULATOR

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Dep-Wah Davis, David Birch, and Edward Stevens, Lone Star College-Tomball

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

During the 2008 presidential elections, as in past election cycles, several issues have risen to dominate discussion among candidates and voters alike including the economy, health care, immigration, and homeland security. Lone Star College-Tomball, in its second year of a three-year subgrant from Learn and Serve America through the Community College National Center for Community Engagement, has as its central project to develop a computer simulation intended as a device for college and high school faculty to instruct students on the workings of the political process. Users of the simulator will attempt to get a fictional political candidate elected to state office, negotiating the myriad campaign events and rituals.

One of the components of the ASSETS Project as it pertains to this year's participation relates to historically low levels of political efficacy and participation among young adult Americans. Political efficacy is a perception. The idea is that citizens believe that their participation generates benefits and at the very least benefits accruing to themselves. In an ideal situation that perception would also flow to participation generating broad based benefits. Associated with low levels of participation among young adults, unfortunately, is also the assumption of corresponding low levels of political efficacy. Voting, or relatively low levels of voting, in elections is only one component of the overall concern expressed by political scientists.

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Introductory American Government and Politics courses do focus on low voter turnout rates among young adults, but they also focus on other aspects of citizen participation. Those 'other' areas amount to examining broad based venues of citizen engagement within the political process. These include opportunities for social capital building that incorporate all citizens. The idea is, as Hudson (1995) points out, to generate a functional democratic process comprised of citizens with the opportunity to participate and who perceive it in their best interests to participate. This functional process is not just the responsibility of the government. Along the way the ultimate goal is for the citizens to have control of what government does as they engage each other. A criterion for generating a more democratic process for Hudson is citizen deliberation. Without deliberation the process is less transparent and less democratic simply as it becomes more exclusionary. It's simple: more engaged citizens, more deliberation, more control of government, and more democracy.

## PROMOTING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli Carpini (2006) argue that there is a growing variety of citizen participation including service learning and other volunteerism opportunities that many more citizens are engaging in designed to seemingly promote Hudson's democratic process. If that is the case then theoretically this would also apply to young adults as well who have not been represented in large numbers as participants in elections but who do have more

opportunities for service learning programs and volunteerism. If they are engaging in volunteerism efforts, the argument goes, it is relatively okay for them not to vote since these 'new' forms of participation can take the place of the 'old-fashioned' forms of participation. From new opportunities to participate comes more deliberation and more broad-based participation and a more healthy democratic process or so the argument goes.

The trouble with this line of argument is that these 'new' forms of participation do not necessarily lead to deliberation nor do they reinforce the importance of our democratic institutions. They lead to individualistic forms of participation in isolation. Citizens, young adults included, may participate at higher levels through service learning volunteerism programs. However, if those programs are not linked to what Alexis de Tocqueville termed "Habits of the Heart" or the values embedded in the Constitutional bed rock of our political process participation is for apolitical reasons tied to micro level politics. By not focusing on the 'old-fashioned' forms of participation and specifically on participating in elections we tend to lose sight of the rewards to citizen participation linked to citizenship. So, the issue of participating in the Assets grant is not just to increase participation in new forms of citizen engagement linked to service learning but to reinforce the importance of traditional forms of participation linked to citizenship responsibilities formulated in terms of service learning.

## POLITICAL SIMULATION

Interactive media has been credited with increasing retention among its users. As a result, many organizations have begun to look at interactive simulations as a method to help educate individuals about various topics. Many students in high school and college are familiar with playing educational simulations. Some may have played *Where in the World is Carmen San Diego* to learn geography or *Reader Rabbit* to help improve word recognition. The use of the simulation to help promote young adults' interest in the political process and the issues that arise as a result is a natural progression to reach this population.

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***The political simulation is designed to promote awareness and stimulate political participation by young adults in traditional avenues of democratic politics.***

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The political simulation created by the Game Design and Simulation students is supplemented with information provided by the students from Introduction to American Government and Politics, Public Speaking, and Introduction to Speech Communication classes. The political simulation is designed to promote awareness and stimulate political participation by young adults in traditional avenues of democratic politics. Ultimately the students in these classes

and the students who enjoy the simulation are coming to a deeper understanding of the link between political participation and citizenship. The goal that has been promoted is a rejection of Harold Lasswell's classic definition of politics as "the struggle over who gets what, when and how." The simulation is an opportunity to engage students and young adults in many venues with a different definition of politics. According to Bay (1981), participation and the use of power by citizens is only one side of the political coin. The "other side is freedom, or justice, or any kind of vision of a better society" (Bay, 1981, p.3). Bay goes on to say that 'politics' is the "thoughtful cooperative action toward resolving political problems" (Ibid, p.4).

If citizen participation is examined from Bay's perspective, then efforts to generate higher levels of participation in young adults must be linked to a better understanding of traditional forms of participation. By simply focusing on service learning projects uncoupled from democratic expectations that are institutionally embedded, there is the risk of the outcome becoming what is termed "Burger King Politics." This is the place citizens go to demand from government services without any sense of obligation for others who may be waiting in line. In actuality, 'customers' are seen as inconvenient obstacles standing in the way of the attainment of a personal goal. The simulation corrects much of this misconception and will be immensely useful to presenting a much deeper form of citizen participation.

The students in the Project Development class were visited by Republican candidate for state representative, Allen Fletcher (who is now State Representative – Elect). Mr. Fletcher explained to the students the process of running for office in general and specifically the difficulties of running against an incumbent. He described the use of brochures, posters, lawn markers, how to word political speeches, and fund raising to name a few of the topics.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While the Project Development class worked on building the simulation, the Game Testing class, headed by Professor Joseph Rhodes, served as the first round testers to ensure the technical elements of the game were in place. In addition, the student government representatives of Tomball and Magnolia High Schools, with the assistance of their teachers, will assess the usefulness of the simulation and plan a broad program to introduce the simulation to upperclassmen of their respective schools in advance of the election in November.

The project ran into some initial problems. The computers that were in the classroom at the beginning of the project were insufficient to perform many of the advanced programming and graphical tasks needed to create the simulation. During the winter break, new computers were obtained and installed. Students found the topic difficult in the beginning. Many were viewing the project as boring; however, they came to the realization that it would be their job to make the simulation entertaining as well as informative.

## REFERENCES

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

**Dep-Wah Davis** is a Professor in Computer Information Technology and a Program Specialist for Game Design and Simulation at Lone Star College-Tomball.

**David Birch** is an Associate Professor of Political Science. He has an MA from the University of Maryland and a BA from the University of Alabama.