

## **“Democracy is Hard”/“Democracy is Messy”**

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Much has been said about generational differences in voting patterns during the 2008 election. An upper-division sociology course–Political Sociology–focused on theory and practice within the context of three pedagogical concerns that were used to help students add the missing element of political involvement to their understanding of what it means to be civically and socially engaged citizen. Working with a grassroots organization, the students applied what they were learning in the class about political involvement to their participation in community initiatives and a “get out the vote” drive.

An examination of generational differences provides an insight into how the social meanings of “civic engagement” and “social responsibility” have changed over time. Much has been made of what previous generations have done in terms of “service” to American society. In his book, *The Greatest Generation*, Tom Brokaw heaped praise upon individuals born between 1895–1926 for their contributions to the greater good (Brokaw, 1998). In contrast, speculation about the most two recent generations–those born between 1965–1981 and those born between 1982–2002–has elicited a “concern” for the future of the United States based upon these generations perceived level of indifference toward political involvement. Thus, pundits worked overtime during the 2008

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This article was supported in part by Award No. 06LHHCA001, granted by the Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve America Higher Education through California Campus Compact. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Corporation for National and Community Service, California Campus Compact, or the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

election raising questions about how generational differences would play out during the election. In the case of the two major parties' nominees, the question became: Would John McCain, born in 1936, defeat Barack Obama, born in 1961? If McCain won, he would be the only president in his "Silent" generation to successfully win a presidential election, while Obama's birth year placed him on the cusp of two generations—late "Baby Boomer" and early "Generation X." His election would mean that the "Boomer" generation would have provided the last three US presidents with William J. Clinton (1946) and George W. Bush (1946) representing the beginning of the generation and Obama its conclusion. If Obama won, what role would generational differences play? How would the different generations relate to the candidates, and how would their various levels of political involvement have an impact on the outcome? What means could be used to attract a new generation of voters that would not likewise repel previous generations of voters?

Questions about how to increase political involvement were also being raised in the academic realm. Finding answers for these questions became the basis of a California Campus Compact-Carnegie Foundation Faculty Fellows: Service Learning for Political Engagement Program (CACC/CF) project that was interested in discovering if college students' political engagement could be increased by actively involving them in service learning experiences. Although service learning is a pedagogical and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with academic instruction and reflection, there had not been a concerted effort to develop service learning courses that purposefully prepared young people for actively participating in the political system. Recognizing that habits formed at an early age are more likely to continue, what, if anything, could be done to create and nurture a potential lifelong commitment to political involvement, and especially voting? Could "educating for democracy" have an impact upon college-aged students (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007)?

Each Fellow was to select a community agency as the site for the service learning component of the course under examination in the project. To coincide with the presidential election, the authors selected Political Sociology, which would be taught Fall 2008. The agency chosen was the San Diego Organizing Project (SDOP), a faith-based, grassroots organization.

While Political Sociology would appear to be a perfect "fit" for the intent of the program, retaining students in the class was a hurdle. When the course first appeared on the class schedule, the thirty-student limit was quickly filled and a student waiting list was started. One-day-a-week, upper-division, elective courses attract students; however, when an e-mail message was sent to the students interested in the class two weeks prior to the beginning of the semester explaining the community service learning component that would require a commitment to activities above and beyond the normal class schedule, students began to drop the course. At the first class, twenty-seven students attended.

After the course was described on the first day, ten students left during the break. The remaining students were stunned; Professor Liu hid her devastation. With seventeen students enrolled, the class began amid ambivalent signs. On the one hand, more than thirty-five students had shown an interest in taking a sociology course on politics; yet, on the other hand, over half of that number showed no interest in the commitment that civic engagement entails. As a palliative to psychic devastation, we concluded that the remaining students were, at the least, amenable to the prospect of joining sociological theory to political practice.

### **“Why is political sociology relevant?”**

The first question posed to students was, “Why is Political Sociology relevant?” The ensuing discussion led to explanations that a systematic examination of power would help students: 1) gain an understanding about how power relations constantly shape daily life, 2) increase their knowledge about issues underlying public policy debates, 3) believe that they could improve the quality of life for family and friends, 4) ask important questions that could open up new ways to see issues, make connections, and find solutions that could produce meaningful answers to that initial question. To achieve these objectives, the course was consciously designed to join theory to practice via three pedagogical concerns.

The course’s three pedagogical concerns were awareness, knowledge, and skills. One of the major areas of sociology deals with the construction of meaning. What becomes “meaningful” to an individual is the product of face-to-face social interaction, discussion, interpretation, and action. To help students acquire a definition of social and civic responsibility that would be meaningful to them required developing awareness of and knowledge about the two theoretical models of power—the pluralist and the elitist—that would be addressed in the class and how the application of those two models, when accompanied with the various dimensions of power (ranging from highly visible to virtually invisible), can lead to very different political outcomes. Placing the generational discussion within the context of power exposed students to the range of perspectives that can emerge based upon when a person was born. Once students developed what one student called “a vocabulary for discussing and analyzing the real world,” working with SDOP would provide practical hands-on experience about how democracy actually works.

### **“Talkin’ about my generation”**

In 1997, ABC news anchor, Peter Jennings, requested that members of his audience contact ABCnews.com to provide a name for the current generation. Among those names were “Generation Y/Why,” “Don’t Label Us,” and “Generation Whatever.” The name that was most often submitted was the “Millennium Generation” and this generation became “Millennials” – the name

most often associated with it. This was the first time a “plebiscite” was conducted which permitted a generation the privilege of giving itself its own identifying name (Peter Jennings cited in Howe and Strauss, 2000).

While the exact definition or length of a generation are debatable, topics that introduced the notion of generational differences resonated with students in the class. Millennials are the population that has been entering college since 2000, and students who were enrolled in the upper-division Political Sociology course in Fall 2008 were born between 1982 and 1987. Millennials are one of the most racially and ethnically diverse generations, and many Millennials have foreign-born parents who are not citizens (Strauss & Howe, 1991). This is the generation of social networks – MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, texting, and the explosion of readily available Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs). It is also the generation of the Iraqi War and the latest economic meltdown. Unlike the previous cohort, Generation X (GenX), Millennials are considered optimistic about their futures. In a June 2009 Los Angeles Times opinion piece, Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hals, coauthor of *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics*, applaud Millennials for “their optimism and sense of personal confidence.” Millennials are coping with the economic downturn by continuing their education or are turning to government and the nonprofit sectors “to fulfill their generation’s desire to serve” by applying for such programs as Teach for America (Winograd & Hals, 21 June 2009).

Rather than a “Kids, what’s the matter with kids today?” approach, the course focused on the changing meaning of citizenship employed by the various generations. The books selected for the course (Zukin, C. Keeter, S. Andolina, M. Jenkins, K. & Delli Carpini, M., 2006; Dalton, R.J., 2006) were upbeat and optimistic about “GenXers” and “Millennials” as the cohorts who were “reshaping American politics,” and changing the definition of what it means to be a “citizen.” For the generations born before 1946, citizenship was defined through the duties of citizenship. One had a duty to vote, to pay taxes, to belong to a political party, and to “[contribute] to the national need” through some form of governmental service, particularly through military service (Dalton, 2006). GenXers and Millennials, however, do not tend to define citizenship as a duty-based role. To them, the role of being a citizen entails individuals taking direct action in dealing with issues of rights and social responsibilities by participating in such activities as “boycotts” – purposefully not buying products from companies that do not treat their employees (or the environment) equitably and “buycotts” – purposefully purchasing products that are environmentally friendly or are labeled “fair trade” (Zukin, C. Keeter, S. Andolina, M. Jenkins, K. & Delli Carpini, M., 2006; Dalton, R.J., 2006). Acknowledging the positive impact of the direct action favored by Millennials helped set a positive tone within the class (Zukin, et.al., 2006; Dalton, R.J., 2006).

While students in the class and in their generation were socially engaged in responsible ways, Millennials tend not to be civically engaged because they did not tend to be interested in politics nor did they tend to vote. Thus, Millennials often lack what Zukin, et.al. (2006) refer to as “cognitive engagement” due to their inattention toward political issues, even those issues that have the possibility of affecting them directly. Students in the course wrote the following when reflecting on generations:

I heard about the baby boom, but I didn't know much about it even though my parents are from the generation. I did not think to consider their experience from mine. When we talked about Dutifuls, Boomers, GenX and GenY, I finally understood why I have so much trouble talking to my grandparents and my parents. I can see why we just can't seem to talk to one another and why we disagree on so many things.

Each generation views the U.S. politics differently because of the experiences each cohort endured. This realization and understanding of the dynamics that make up the United States have had the biggest impact on me. Understanding that the U.S. is comprised of people whose experiences outline the way in which they act politically, socially, and civically has a profound underlying message: there are not gender, racial, and ethnic differences within the U.S., but generational differences that truly separate our opinions.

When Professor Liu played the video in class showing how much technology is used in my cohort, aspects of my life really started to make sense. I have known and used the computer practically my entire life. I do not know what it means to go to the library to find out the information I am looking for. Google is my library and technology is my life. Whether it is my cell phone, my laptop, my I pod, or car that effortlessly switches from being battery powered to using the engine to save gas, I am a slave to technology. I cannot go an entire day without using some sort of electronic device and expect information to be presented through this way at a rapid speed. My mother did not live like this, and is continually amazed at the speeds I am capable of navigating my way through cyberspace. My grandmother is a different story, the idea of instant messaging blows her mind and she would rather talk on the telephone than over the computer. Everything mentioned above are examples of generational gaps, which affect the way different cohorts relate to political candidates. I am now aware of the way people tend to vote based on age and the characteristics that goes along with it.

Using technological tools on a generation weaned on them was a means of generating interest and meaning as well. As a further way to build community [This was a sociology class, after all.], students had been paired up to bring snacks and drinks for each class meeting. Each pair was also instructed to bring in “anything” political they would want to share with the others. Students brought in “YouTube” selections that ranged from skits, to parodies, to music. These “YouTube” pieces often sparked lively discussions about the content of the pieces and how they related to the subject matter of the course.

### **“Democracy is hard!”**

Entreaties to “just vote” and a mere understanding of generational differences were not a sufficient basis for getting these Millennial students to become politically involved. Being an informed electorate requires that voters be knowledgeable about the issues. To become informed, the various SDOP student teams became debate teams, and each debate team was randomly assigned two California propositions to research both the pro and con positions, to prepare information packets for the class detailing those positions, and to write a paper explaining which position they supported and why they chose that position. On the 2008 California ballot, there were twelve state propositions but only six non-bond issue propositions were selected for the debates. Each of the six teams had to prepare to debate both sides of the two propositions they were assigned. On the day of the debate, the teams drew to see which position they would hold during the debate and each member of the team had to present an equitable portion of the debate. (For the second proposition the two teams were to debate, the pro and con positions were reversed.) The entire class voted prior to and immediately after the debate on how they would vote on the proposition at that point in time.

Interestingly, the debates were not conclusive in persuading the class *per se*; rather, it was the discussions afterwards that had a greater impact on producing “political capital” or “individuals who pay attention to the news, who are knowledgeable about politics and government, who have confidence in their ability to make a difference. . . .” (Zukin, et.al., 2006).

Students voted before and immediately after the debate, and some positions were changed based upon the debate; however, purely by chance after the discussion of the first debate, students were asked to vote once again, and there were further changes from the tally taken immediately after the debate. As a consequence, this third “straw vote” was instituted for all of the debates. Students were asked to voluntarily discuss their vote and the factors that affected their switching sides. In the cases for switching votes, the reasons cited were, “I never thought of it [the issue] in that way,” and “I learned so much about the propositions from those debates.” The “passion and willingness to disagree” served as impetus for others. More importantly, students learned that the

propositions were written with “an emotional appeal” and were misleading at times with “sometimes when you vote ‘yes,’ it means ‘no’” and vice versa. Once again, when questions about propositions arose, students used their cell phones and PDAs to search for information which served as a basis for providing “evidence” for their position during the discussion.

Preparing for the debates provided students with the insight that democracy requires an educated population that must be informed about the issues. Passion alone is insufficient, and frequently detrimental, to the democratic process. Through researching the propositions, students began making the link between citizenship and civic engagement and realizing that being detached from the political sphere has potential social consequences.

It was how the students prepared and communicated their opinions with one another that showed they are Millennials. Team members texted one another their ideas and critiques about the propositions; during the question/answer period, students either used their cell phones, PDAs or their laptops in real time to find the latest “facts and figures” to address audience questions; students sent each other web links to news articles, YouTube videos, and blogs about the issues they were researching; they found polling information and shared it with the class.

Ultimately a class consensus developed that concluded: Being informed about the issues is necessary for a pluralistic society to function as smoothly as it can; yet, becoming informed is not a simple task to undertake. One student wrote:

This class got me a lot more interested in politics than I ever was before. I have learned that the more you are educated on a certain topic, the more you want to be engaged in it but it takes so much time and effort to be informed. Democracy is hard! It takes a lot of work.

### **“Democracy is messy”**

The final pedagogical concern focused on the development of political skills resulting from the use of a community service learning component by working with SDOP. This practical component became essential in helping students see a direct connection between what they were learning in the classroom and what they were doing with SDOP concerning the process of civic engagement through political action.

In existence for thirty years, SDOP is active in twenty-nine congregations around San Diego County, and it focuses its attention on congregations that are located in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods that are politically under-represented. One of SDOP’s goals is to empower local residents to voice their concerns and to gain a commitment from resource holders in order to help

residents achieve their goal of creating a better community. SDOP organizers are assigned to work with designated congregations which, in turn, create their own organizing ministries so that they have the ability to articulate the issues they deem important for their particular communities. Once an issue has been contacted and named, extensive research is conducted so that appropriate leaders can be identified and invited to forums known as “Community Actions.” The resource holders, such as the Chief of Police, city council members, and/or other local representatives, are invited to hear the community’s concerns and to help provide the means to resolve those concerns (San Diego Organizing Project website).

SDOP conducted discussions within their congregations, and from those discussions, issues confronting youth (drop out rates, gang violence, the lack of after-school activities and the resources to finance them) were named as the top priorities. As a result, in March 2008, SDOP launched an initiative they called the “Year of Our Youth.” Our intention for the class was that by working at the grassroots level, students—many of whom were eligible to vote for the first time—would witness a model of civic and social engagement that would be meaningful and purposeful to them and that it would inspire them to become more politically involved. Thus, the class was divided into six teams each of which worked with a specific congregation.

Working with a grassroots organization can be difficult. There had never been a course-based connection between USD and SDOP. SDOP’s leadership was unclear about how college courses are structured in terms of syllabi that definitively lay out learning objectives, time schedules, and course requirements. Scheduling events became a nightmare in terms of who, where, what, and how as SDOP tended to function in a less routinized manner than the class did. This resulted in the development of a class mantra: “Democracy is messy. Civic engagement, social responsibility, and working with grassroots organizations require flexibility and the ability to deal with ambiguity.” As a consequence, it took considerable effort and persistence to establish a working relationship with SDOP. Students describe their experiences in these ways:

It was through the participation in community service learning and class discussions that really gave me a new perspective. Before taking this course, I stood more along the lines of the right-wing. I voted Republican in the last two elections. I did not believe in offering many social programs to those who needed assistance. I was jaded from too many people taking advantage of our welfare, disability, and unemployment services. I believed that in order to change where you are placed on the social stratification ladder, it was solely through individualism. In other words, it is up to individuals to improve their situation by their own efforts. Nevertheless, as I learned from participating in the community

service learning portion of the class, the community wants to be involved. They are trying to improve their situations through their own efforts. The residents of City Heights want to make a difference. But in order to do so they need strong leaders and resources. I knew that my political views had shifted as a result of this experience.

We mustn't forget the two most significant [aspects of] my experience, the phone call/voter turnout and the SDOP Youth Convention. All these instances rallying, phone calling, knocking on doors and stuffing envelopes made me realize that I grew to be engaged, engaged in being a better citizen.

The experiences I had with the grass roots organization San Diego Organizing Project gave me a chance to experience what democracy was like first hand. This gave me an opportunity to see how disorganized and complicated or "messy" politics can be.

Our work with SDOP was an example of how people who may not agree on everything can come together to work towards a common goal. This experience gave me a more realistic picture of the challenges of democracy in the real world, but also showed me that ordinary people do have the ability to create change.

Once again, their techno-sophistication was crucial when working with SDOP during a "get out the vote" campaign held in a parish hall on Sunday, November 2. Nine members of SDOP congregations and sixteen members of the class made 2,500 calls in a two-hour period calling residents identified as "infrequent voters" who lived in SDOP "territory." With script in hand, students used their cell phones to make the calls. Their technological sophistication placed them at a decided advantage when compared to the older residents involved in the "get out the vote" campaign. Thus, when questions arose such as the location of polling places or general questions about voter eligibility, one student—who was reticent to make "cold calls" to strangers—served as the "fact finder." She was able to find the answers quickly by using her cell phone to track down the information and provide the answers for the callers. Being able to access the information made students aware of the power they possessed through their familiarity with technology—their ability to get results dumbfounded the less techno-savvy, older generation, SDOP volunteers. Students developed a level of respect for the older generations because of their enthusiasm and their ability to approach perfect strangers in the parish hall and "work the room" by engaging the audience in discussion and providing information on topics at hand. As one student noted, "The 2008 election should be viewed as a beacon of hope for those who fell into apathy because they

believed that they were being ignored politically. I have never felt more patriotic than the night we participated in the 'Get Out The Vote' campaign calling infrequent voters urging them to go to the polls."

The final class project was to attend San Diego's "Election Central" on Tuesday, November 5th. SDOP leaders, congregation members and USD students watched the returns roll in. Once again, students astounded SDOP congregation members by being able to access election returns faster than the local television stations could report them. Students created mini viewing stations by accessing the live video feed of McCain's concession speech and Obama's victory speech for those who were unable to see the television monitors because of the crowd.

### **"This course made me a better citizen"**

In a discussion conducted during the second week about their political involvement, twelve out of seventeen students indicated that their awareness and understanding of politics were limited ("I don't know anything about politics."), and as a consequence, their interest was minimal at best ("I have never voted before and was eligible to vote in the 2004 election.") and indifferent at worst ("Regardless of being eligible, I never really cared about voting."). The course sought to teach students that democracy required an informed populace and that democracy requires action—both in terms of civic engagement and social responsibility. While the students, as members of the Millennial generation, were socially engaged, they needed to see the linkage between social engagement, civic responsibility, and direct political involvement. Through the class students became aware that voting is a tangible way of voicing their positions and is a crucial element in a democratic society. At the end of the semester, one of the students wrote:

Prior to college, I was relatively unaware or ambivalent towards the political world. My parents talked about various political issues and their stances on them, or certain candidates and whether they were "okay" or "scary," but, in general, politics was a realm that to which I did not feel that I had access. Politics was about who was the president of the United States—and depending on who won, life would either continue as normal or get worse. I did not grow up seeing politics as a vehicle for change or as really having an everyday impact on the common citizen at all. Some things in the world simply "sucked," but that was the way things were and no one person had enough of a voice to change that.

Creating a learning environment where students gain confidence in their ability to research, defend, and discuss their positions is a key element in getting

an already “engaged” population to take the next step in political involvement by voting. A single course cannot guarantee a lifelong commitment to being politically involved, but in order to make politics meaningful, it is essential to give students an awareness of, knowledge about, and the skills necessary to critically analyze issues. If something is meaningful, it will have significance and this, in turn, can lead to active political involvement. At the very least, students were no longer either ignorant of or indifferent to politics:

I learned how messy democracy and organizing can be through our work with SDOP. This course really made me a better citizen because I voted for the first time. It made me engage in politics, which was something I knew nothing about. I have a better understanding of how a society runs and this is important to know as a member of any society. It makes me want to go out and educate people because democracy demands a literate population, and this is one of the most important things I learned.

In the past, I felt as if I had no motivation to vote for any of the candidates presented to me but now I know the importance of my participation and am proud to have politically engaged by voting; it is my duty as a U.S. citizen.

A few months ago, I was one of the 12% [Millennials] who believed my vote is insignificant. I thought this because politics revolve around issues that do not concern my life and concern issues that I do not understand. I knew who was running for president and I heard of the state initiatives of past elections on the television and radio, but I never knew that I can apply it to my life. I discovered that the language of the proposition on the voter ballot aimed at a certain audience and that if I did not learn the pros and the cons of every proposition, then I would never be able to apply it to my life. Being knowledgeable of what I was voting for and why I was voting for the presidential candidate and proposition was part of my social and civic responsibility. I was participating in the political sphere because I became responsible enough to know the right information and knew enough to vote intelligently. In other words, the course taught me that being an informed person is the most critical motivator to want to participate in civic and social arenas, such as SDOP, and organizing is one of the most powerful and innovative methods of achieving a desired goal for the common good.

By giving Millennials a language directed at their innate “goodness” –that is, by informing the students that they really were already “socially engaged” – this framing provided a break through in their ability to understand the difference between the two aspects of power. Thus, the price paid for non-political involvement was the possibility of increasing the concentration of power in the hands of an elite. While social engagement is inherently pluralistic, politics requires an informed and involved citizenry before it can take on any semblance of truly being pluralistic in its scope. As one student wrote:

Participation is key to the function of the democratic process . . . My participation with SDOP and the local churches really made this clear to me, because without the help of organizers like our class and other organizational leaders, the community would not be as motivated or involved in things like voting, fundraising, education and other ways of paying political dues.

Providing students with theory and practice within the context of our three pedagogical concerns helped them to add the missing element of political involvement to their understanding of what it means to be civically engaged and socially responsible. Having them engage in face-to-face interactions with other generations also added another dimension to their understanding of social networks, one that goes well beyond Facebook and My Space.

Our first class discussion asked: What is the relevance of Political Sociology? The answer was to increase knowledge, improve the quality of life of yourself and your family, to understand power, and to exert influence. After my experiences in this course, I have implemented all of these elements into my daily life. I have increased my knowledge in the political process. I have changed my mind set and have become more open to other beliefs and ideas. I have also encouraged those closest to me, to exercise their civic duties by voting. In addition, I understand the power in numbers. We as citizens do have the power to make a difference. The SDOP convention brought all of the hard work, commitments to youth, our class discussions, and activities to fruition.

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