The Civil Citizen

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Abstract

Considerable concern is focused nowadays on young Americans' civic engagement. "Civic engagement" is often used as a catch-all term to refer to a wide array of civic and political activities, but this term misses civil citizenship. This article draws on interviews I conducted with thirty-five young American professionals to explore what they think constitutes a "good citizen." What emerges from their answers is less a political or civic citizen than a civil citizen whose polite individualism, proximate reach and facile, fleeting engagement may help explain younger Americans' weaker political engagement.

Keywords: citizenship; millennials; engagement

Introduction

In public discourse about democracy and citizenship, "civic engagement" is often used as a catch-all term to encompass a variety of attitudes, knowledge and activities. Yet this catch-all concept glosses over important differences in American citizens' engagement. Several recent studies indicate that younger Americans born in 1965 onward are less politically engaged than their elders – at least by traditional measures of voting, partisan affiliation, political knowledge, and party activity – but that they are as much if not more civically engaged, especially in community volunteering (e.g., Dalton, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins & Delli Carpini, 2006).

Cliff Zukin and his colleagues (2006) draw on three original national surveys and eleven focus groups conducted in different parts of the country to conclude that "the vast majority of citizens are either disengaged from all forms of public life or specialize in either civic or political forms of engagement," (Zukin et al., 2006, p. 200) but that younger Americans in what they call the GenX and DotNet generations (born in 1965-1976, and after 1976, respectively) are less likely to be engaged overall. To the extent that these younger Americans are engaged they tend to be "civic specialists" favoring "direct hands-on work in cooperation with others" – from runs and walks for charity, to tutoring and mentoring, to park and river clean-ups – which occurs "within nongovernmental organizations and rarely touches upon electoral politics" (Zukin et al., 2006, pp. 51, 63).

Russell Dalton (2008) analyzes data from the 2004 General Social Survey and the 2005 Citizenship, Involvement, and Democracy Survey conducted by Georgetown University to argue that older Americans are more likely to be "duty-based" citizens who vote, pay taxes, serve on juries, join the military when called, and obey the law. Younger Americans, in contrast, are more likely to be "engaged" citizens who vote less, but participate in less conventional politics like boycotts, public demonstrations and email petitions to politicians, as well as socially conscious consumerism, and helping others in need locally to globally. Others affirm that volunteerism among American students has been rising since the early 1990s (Pryor et al., 2010; Wattenberg, 2008). But drawing on several national surveys, Wattenberg concludes that younger Americans are no more or

even somewhat less inclined to boycott, petition, and demonstrate than their Baby Boomer predecessors while they are clearly less politically informed and less engaged in conventional political action, such as donating to and volunteering for political campaigns (Wattenberg, 2008).

While some scholars suggest that civic activity can lead to political activity (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Zukin et al., 2006), there appears to be little evidence thus far that young Americans' greater volunteerism is leading to greater political engagement (Macedo et al., 2005; Wattenberg, 2008). Indeed, a national survey of undergraduate students conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics in 2000 found that 85% of respondents believed that "community voluntarism is better than political engagement for addressing issues facing the community" (Sitaraman and Warren, 2003, p. 17). This statistic, like Dalton, and Zukin et al.'s subsequent research, suggests that young Americans are developing a different kind of citizenship, one that does not accord with conventional politics, and which may even eschew politics altogether. An intriguing hint of a different kind of citizenship comes from a passing note about the focus groups Zukin and his colleagues (2006) conducted with Americans in varied locations:

> [M]ost of the people we met were comfortable talking about their communities, their day-to-day activities, or their (mostly negative) opinions about politics and politicians….When we turned the discussion to more explicitly political forms of public engagement; however, it was a very different story. Few were able to describe their own political lives. Most had not thought much about it. Asked if citizenship carried any responsibilities, the few people who answered spoke mostly of good conduct, looking after one's family, and occasionally being a good neighbor. Surprisingly few mentioned voting, staying informed, or participating more generally in the political world. While this pattern was evident in almost all the groups we spoke with, it seemed especially true for GenXers and DotNets….[F]or most of these young people, awareness of the more traditional world of politics seemed almost non-existent (p. 49).

My own research here digs deeper into how young Americans on the tail end of Generation X (born 1965-1976) and at the start of the DotNet Generation (born after 1976) think about citizenship, uncovering a different kind of citizen engaged in "good conduct" rather than political or even civic action.

Much of what scholars currently know about young Americans' citizenship comes from national surveys. For all their virtues, surveys typically constrain people's responses to standardized answer choices. This is useful for measuring citizens' knowledge, attitudes and activities as Dalton, Zukin et al. and others do (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz, 2001; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995), but it is less helpful for deeper understanding of how people think, in their own words, about citizenship and what it should entail. Of course, there is no clear correspondence between what people think and what they do. However, the meanings people attach to things can shape how they act toward those things. Existing surveys clearly indicate that many young Americans are acting differently than their elders as citizens, and these differences have consequences for the future of American democracy. It is thus worth digging deeper than surveys typically allow to gain a richer sense of how young Americans think about citizenship, in their own words.

Method and Demographic Profile

In line with a core tenet of symbolic interactionism – that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2) – I assume that the meanings common terms like "politics" and the "good citizen" evoke in the minds of Americans help to define what public acts are imaginable, acceptable and compelling. As part of a larger qualitative study of how young American professionals make sense of politics, community and citizenship, I asked my respondents' "what does it mean to you to be a 'good citizen'?" This article focuses on their answers to this question.

The data for this study come from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews I conducted with thirty-five young American professionals in the Boston area from July 2004 to June 2006. Their occupations ranged widely, from research assistant, nurse practitioner, and software developer, to architect, corporate attorney, and U.S. Army lieutenant. I chose to study professionals because they tend to have more work autonomy and responsibility, and a considerable literature indicates that workers with more autonomy and responsibility are more likely to be active in civic and political life (e.g., Burns, Schlozman & Verba, 2001; Daniel, Grunberg & Greenberg, 1996; Elden, 1981; Pateman, 1970; Wilson & Musick, 1997). I used U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics listings of professional occupations to get a sense of the range of professional occupations and to help me select professionals to interview. I then screened prospective interviewees, asking

for their occupation as well as how much and what kind (in their own words) of freedom and responsibility they exercised at work. Those prospective interviewees who indicated that their professions entailed "some" or "a lot" of autonomy and responsibility, and/or whose own job descriptions confirmed such qualified for the study.

Demographically, with one exception, all my respondents were born between 1975 and 1980 in the United States. At the time of my interview with them, they ranged in age from 23 to 32 years, and had lived the vast majority of their lives in the United States. Seventeen of my interviewees were women, eighteen were men. Beyond these demographic variables, I let my respondents vary by education, race, religion, income, home ownership, marital and parental status. A majority (22 out of 35) completed bachelor's degrees, two had high school degrees, eight had Master's degrees, one a doctorate, and the remainder had professional degrees in medicine and law. Twenty-seven identified as White, two as Black, two as Hispanic, four as Asian. All but five identified their family religious background as Christian (21 Protestant, nine Catholic), the rest as Jewish, Hindu, or non-religious, though most (23/35) reported that they did not practice a religion at the time I screened them. Their incomes ranged from $20,000-$30,000 to $150,000-$250,000, though most (24/35) made $60,000 or less. The great majority (28/35) did not own a home, and rented instead. Most (26/35) were single, three were engaged, five were married, and one identified as in a domestic partnership. Only one of my young respondents was a parent.

Politically, I sought a balance of political orientations. Fourteen of my respondents identified as independents, 11 as Democrats, nine as Republicans, and one as a Libertarian. On a ten-point scale, 1 being most politically conservative, 10 being most liberal, seventeen interviewees chose a number between 1 and 5, and sixteen chose a number between 6 and 10. The mean self-ranking was 5.55. The median was 5.

My interviewees were also on the whole relatively engaged in civic and political life. All said they were registered to vote, 27 claimed they voted in all or most elections, 30 were occasionally or often involved in voluntary associations, and 22 recalled taking part in at least five of 15 different public activities over the previous 12 months, including one-day volunteering, charitable fundraising, donating money to a public cause, signing a public petition, and contacting an elected official. These data points when compared with national survey findings

(ANES, 2004; Zukin et al., 2006) indicate that my interviewees were on the whole more engaged in civic and political life than most Americans. Their relatively greater civic and political engagement was not a precondition for their participation in this study, but it suited my inquiry given my interest in studying young American professionals whose greater job autonomy and responsibility disposed them (at least theoretically) to participate in public life.

I selected my interviewees using a non-random, purposive sampling method. With all prospective interviewees I conducted an initial screening survey by phone or email to ensure that they fit the basic profile I sought (i.e., American professionals born in the mid-1970s to 1980 who had spent most of their lives in the United States), and that I gathered a balanced sample by gender and political orientation. None of my interviewees were paid. Most of my respondents (23) responded to appeals for interviews I posted on the internet, at craigslist.org and other venues. The other 12 agreed to interview when I asked them either at alumni events, social gatherings, or through friends. A majority of my respondents thus self-selected into this study. This self-selection bias may help account for my respondents' relatively high levels of civic and political engagement as they volunteered for a study that asked them how they "define themselves, make sense of basic public issues, and connect with the world around them," as the appeal for interviewees read.

The interviews ranged from 1:42 to 3:35 hours and minutes in length, with the vast majority lasting between two and three hours. Most of the questions were open-ended. In a few cases I offered my respondents multiple choice questions, or hypothetical opinions for them to respond to, but in all these cases I solicited, recorded and studied their open-ended explanations. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in full, then coded using the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti.

This research project stands in a long line of qualitative interview-based studies of American political culture (e.g., ; Croteau, 1995; Hochschild, 1981; Lane, 1962; Munson, 2009; Reinarman, 1987). Such studies may not statistically represent what is going on in larger populations, but they can be used to challenge or develop existing theory, bring depth to complement existing surveys' breadth, and generate hypotheses or questions to pursue through quantitative research (Lamont and White, 2008). I here employ my qualitative interview data to assess and critique the civil conception of citizenship many of my interviewees upheld.

In so doing, I try to follow in both style and substance the "social science as public philosophy" that Robert Bellah and his colleagues advocate in their bestselling book, *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan & Swidler, 1985, pp. 297-307). Such social science sheds light on shared assumptions and principles so that specialists and citizens alike can ponder and debate their public implications. Such social science seems to me well suited to inquiry about the eminently public issues of democracy and citizenship.

What Does It Mean to Be a Good Citizen?

When I asked my young American interviewees "what does it mean to you to be a good citizen?" most of them did not mention politics or even civics much, if at all. To illustrate, here are four examples of the modal response they offered (italics indicate their emphasis):

> Bernard (28 year old software developer): I guess like they teach you in Boy Scouts, you're always supposed to leave the place cleaner than… when you arrived, and that kind of thing. And I guess you can apply that to most things….You should try to contribute in some way in all or most of the things you do. Or at least try not to be a burden on other people. You shouldn't go throwing trash out your window, you should be a nice person, you should be polite…you should go out of your way to help people.

> Valerie (27 year old genetic counselor): Being a contributing member of society. And I mean that not in a hierarchical way or a snobby way, but just that everyone should do their part in one way or another, you know, like in just making society and your environment and your community and all that stuff better. Helping each other. If you see someone who needs help, do something for them. It can be as simple as if there's rubbish on the floor, pick it up. Just making life more beautiful and more peaceful and more enjoyable for everyone as much as you can. My biggest problem I have with people are when they just take, and they just take and take and take, and then they don't give back in any way. Those are the ones who I think really damage,

and are *not* good citizens. It's okay to take, but you have to give too.

Mark (28 year old software demonstration specialist): Responsibility. I mean that's probably the first piece, to be responsible, to be civil it's sort of like the social contract. I think Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote about that, the idea that by opting to partake in society, you're also opting to treat people reasonably, and to, you know, to not massacre, kill, murder, rape, whatever, but to conduct yourself in a civil manner, to observe certain *rules*. So I think that a lot of that has to do with being a citizen. And again, responsibility comes in many forms, whether that may be conservation or whether that's, you know, to fight for your country or whether that's to make good choices that don't hurt other people around you. I think that, again, as we get larger, you know, as far as the number of people I think it's important to keep in mind that when you're in an elevator by yourself, do whatever you want, okay – you can make faces in the mirror, act funny, you know. But when there are twenty other people in that elevator, you're constricted in a certain way, you know, there are certain things that you just *don't do*. You're not going to practice your yoga stretches or whatever. You're gonna be a little more conscientious. And you should be. Because you don't want to hurt somebody or whatever. You're not going to throw punches. You want to be nice.

Philip (27 year old real estate broker): Doing your part…If you have a piece of trash, don't throw it on the street if there's a trash barrel right there. If there's a woman with a baby and she's having trouble opening a door, open that door for her. Somebody falls down, help them up. If you see a crime, I'm not saying try to stop it, but try to maybe get other people, if the law's around, to stop it. The greater good of society, like, trying to help. Doing things that are right and just.

One way to approach these four answers is to examine the general principle(s) they advance, as well as the examples of good citizenship they raise. To the examples first, all of them refer not to voting, discussing or being informed

about politics, contacting representatives, petitioning to pass or overturn a law, participating in a sit-in, boycott or demonstration, volunteering on an election campaign, pursuing a public issue in court, or the many other possible forms of political engagement. Rather, the examples offered refer to proper conduct in interaction with others, including strangers: do not "massacre, kill, murder or rape"; help those in distress, such as victims of a crime, or a fall; do not throw trash on the street, and if you see trash on the street, pick it up; do not do yoga stretches or throw punches while in an elevator with others; and open doors for those who may need help opening doors.

As the above responses suggest, such proper conduct or civility is rooted in the general principle that the good citizen is thoughtful of, and helpful to others. But the examples these four modal responses provide suggest at least three significant circumscriptions to this principle. First, citizenship, as civility, is enacted individually rather than collectively. One does not, and should not, need others to be civil toward others. Indeed, civility is more commonly understood not as a collective or situationally contingent norm, but rather as an internalized ethic, a personally cultivated disposition to consideration for others that a properly socialized citizen should implement in any situation, regardless of what others do. Second, citizenship as civility is constituted in acts of consideration and helpfulness toward one's immediate environment, and the people in it, whether on the street, at work, home, or elsewhere. Civil citizens are foremost nice, not assertive or passionate. Third, these acts need not take much effort; one does not have to change one's routines in order to be a good citizen. For example, on the way to work, I can throw my morning coffee in the trash rather than on the ground. I can refrain from killing anyone on my way. I can open doors for others at the subway and at my workplace. I can stand still while in the elevator with others. These civil acts do not just *help* make me a good citizen; they make me a good citizen. That is, civility is not a necessary supplement or corollary to anything else, such as political or civic engagement. Civility suffices as good citizenship.

Not only does good citizenship not require political engagement in the minds of many of my interviewees, but it can be exercised in an almost infinite variety of ways, from the most modest to the most extensive. Some will do more, some will do less depending on time constraints and inspiration, and that is

acceptable. As Elizabeth, a 27 year old clinical psychologist, explained in her own response to the good citizen question,

> I think, obviously, not doing wrong constitutes a good citizen. So not stealing, not killing .…I think it's perfectly acceptable to sort of be kind of a fly on the wall in society and be considered a good citizen. I don't think you need to necessarily do any one specific thing that is going to make your mark. I think there are certain people who have a little bit more intrinsic motivation to go out there and do specific things that kind of leave a mark on the world and that's great. But I don't think everybody has to do that.

In this "fly on the wall" conception, people can fulfill their citizenship by responsibly performing their everyday private roles as workers, friends, and family members. Thus, as Elizabeth told me, "I personally think my number one responsibility as a good citizen is to raise children who behave themselves in the world, who don't go out and make trouble, basically."

There was one notable exception to this modal concept of civil citizenship. When asked what constitutes a good citizen, Edward, a gay 25-year old computer researcher, remarked:

> Up to high school I never really thought about politics at all. I used to actually kind of have a disinclination to read about politics or to listen to it or hear about it. I've always been very liberal. I mean, I think being gay, it's kind of a default. But I think I've gotten a lot more interested in politics. But in a lot of ways I feel very cynical about it also, you know. So like in high school, I remember, there was this kid who was passing out these things that said "Free Mumia", and he was telling people about it. And actually I was interested in my school's chapter of Amnesty International and I was involved in the environmental club and so, I think to a certain extent, I'd like to believe that we can accomplish something to change the world. But, at the same time, you know...I feel like these [Amnesty International] letterwriting campaigns don't change that much really. I think

that the only place that really makes more of a concrete difference is elections.

Here, Edward offers us a brief narrative of his development as a political citizen, which ends with what is, these days, a culturally unusual conclusion, especially for young Americans. The Amnesty International, environmental and "Free Mumia [Abu-Jamal]" activities Edward and other American high school and college students are exposed to and/or participate in now leave him feeling like they may not be so effective at bringing about change. Instead, Edward concludes that "the only place" where citizens can make "more of a concrete difference" is in elections.

To the extent that my interviewees thought about citizenship in political terms, they tended to think of elections, and particularly voting. They did not raise boycotts, demonstrations, sit-ins, or even organizing via the internet, as one might expect from Russell Dalton's characterization of young Americans as "engaged citizens" more inclined to unconventional politics (Dalton, 2008). Edward was no different than my other respondents in thinking of politics in electoral terms, and he may have imagined little if anything more than voting as the proper act of a good citizen. Remarkably though, his conception of the good citizen is not a nice civil citizen, or even a civic citizen raising awareness about human rights or environmental destruction, but an "effective" political citizen in the most conventional sense: a participant in elections.

It should be noted that Edward spoke these words in November 2005, a year after the 2004 presidential election, in which incumbent President George W. Bush defeated Democrat John Kerry, a win Bush interpreted as a mandate to continue waging a war in Iraq, despite frequently reported casualties, American and Iraqi. Such a political context can impress upon citizens the importance of elections, and Edward did in fact go on to talk about the presidential election. But this context makes Edward's response all the more remarkable since the vast majority of my interviews were conducted after the 2004 election – not to mention the historically close and contested 2000 election – yet the majority of my interviewees thought of citizenship in more civil than electoral terms.

It is also worth noting that in response to the "good citizen" question, a few respondents did prescribe political engagement in certain ways: besides Edward, two mentioned voting, a few said staying politically informed, three

raised changing or improving laws, and one mentioned discussing politics with family and co-workers. But these political answers were often embedded in more civil responses. For instance, Charles, a 25 year old investment analyst, like Mark, started his response to the good citizen question with the need for responsibility. "I think the number one thing is responsibility and realizing that your actions affect other people...which I think is highly lacking in today's society. I find most people are trying to push the blame on others. Responsibility is a dirty word and no one wants to have it, you know." This initial statement urging responsibility could have led Charles in any number of directions, including: assertions of political or economic responsibility as, say, consumers, workers or taxpayers; examples of collective rather individual responsibility; and/or a call for responsibility to those distant as much as those near, on whom American citizens may have direct and indirect impact as consumers, workers, and/or taxpayers. Yet when I asked Charles "how would a good citizen establish or restore that sense of responsibility?" he responded as most of my interviewees responded, with an individualistic civility oriented toward those near:

> Well essentially, it's just common courtesies. I mean, you know, the clichés – character is what you do when no one's looking, you know… not trying to jump through red lights, holding doors for people, letting people in, cleaning up after yourself, really basic things that are just lacking everywhere in society. Basic responsibilities. You know, if it's a common space, people try to maximize their usage and don't clean up after themselves. Simple things like you go to a baseball game or a concert and you have a lawn section and you arrange yourself in a way such that you take up the most space or you leave little pockets of space all over the place but not enough place for another person to come and sit down. Really basic things that if you were aware of

> the bigger picture, and, how your actions affect others, you know, hopefully you wouldn't do.

Only after further prompting did Charles then mention politics:

> Me: So it's civility?

> Charles: Civility! Yes! A lot of it's civility. But, you know, also one thing, by definition I mean voting. I mean if you don't participate in the process you've no reason to complain about it….And if you really have a disagreement and you feel that you can make things better then it's your responsibility to go out there and run for that office, if you really feel that you can do a better job and it's really that important to you.

Hence, political engagement does come up for Charles, as it did for Edward, but it comes second to civility in his response. Moreover, while Edward does not specify in the above quote whether political engagement for him is individual or collective, Charles here articulates it in individual terms: his many "you's" appear singular rather than plural, giving no indication that an individual's vote or bid for office emerges from a social context, or collective action.

When scholars interested in democracy speak about "civic engagement" they tend to concentrate on civic and political citizenship, but what emerged from my interviews with young Americans was not mainly politics or civics, but civility. These three forms of citizenship are worth distinguishing conceptually. *Political citizens* participate in government or seek to influence government by voting or urging others to vote, contacting a representative or urging others to do so, pursuing legal action to change laws, volunteering for an issue or election campaign, running for public office, etc. *Civic citizens* address individual or group needs and problems individually or collectively but not through government, and they do so by participating in a walk or run for cancer research, tutoring or mentoring a child, volunteering at a soup kitchen, cleaning up parks and rivers, etc. *Civil citizens*, in contrast, are foremost considerate toward others by putting trash where it belongs, providing directions to those lost, opening doors for others, smiling and saying hello, helping those in accidents, giving up their bus seat for another, etc.

Community neighborliness may have atrophied over the last several decades (Wuthnow, 1998), but civility still appears to be a virtue for some young Americans (Chiodo & Martin, 2005; Zukin et al., 2006). Civility may be a weaker form of consideration than neighborliness, but it extends beyond one's neighbors – who are more often than not racially, and socio-economically similar – to the many and diverse strangers contemporary Americans commonly encounter in everyday life. Civility does not mean making soup or baking cookies for similar

neighbors, or diverse strangers for that matter, but it does entail smaller acts of consideration for strangers and neighbors alike.

As civility proponents past and present, academic and popular (e.g., Washington, 1987; Martin, 1996; Carter, 1999; Forni, 2002, Smith, 2002) remind us, everyday acts of civility matter considerably to the quality of our lives, whether enacted as self-restraint or pro-active kindness. Clearly, whether or not people "massacre, kill, murder or rape," as my respondent Mark put it, matters to the quality of social life. But smaller acts of incivility, such as littering, and neglecting to open doors for others, can also adversely impact social life. These and the myriad of small acts of civility or incivility in everyday life signal, subtly or not, whether people respect and care for each other, and their environments.

In a democracy, civility makes it easier for citizens to get help from each other in times of distress, such as when floods, hurricanes, fires, or accidents occur. Civility can help in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable citizens, such as the handicapped, the poor, the young, and the aged. Civility can also help ensure smooth interactions and exchanges between citizens in social and political situations, and prevent or reduce acrimonious conflict when citizens' interests, goals or manners clash. And yet, the civility my interviewees upheld does not seem to mix well with the political action democracy requires of citizens.

At the start of each interview, I asked my respondents to write down what immediately came to mind when they thought of the word "politics." Many of the words and phrases they wrote associated politics with conflict. These included: "bickering," "argument," "struggle," "contest," "mudslinging," "dividing," "divisive," "tear apart," "struggle and fight," "war," "terrorism," "social Darwinism," "disharmony," "causes conflict," "hotly debated," and "why can't we all just get along?" Conflict is antithetical to the civil citizen's polite ethic, and since politics entails conflict, politics readily seemed distasteful to my civil respondents.

Another reason politics seems distasteful is because it involves compromise. As Laura, a 26 year old corporate attorney, told me, "I understand that you have to make concessions [in politics]. I don't think all politicians are crooked, but I do think it's hard to be entirely like a straight arrow in politics. There's a lot of compromising. And, I don't think there's much we can do about it because it's just a reality." Compromise has an ambivalent meaning in the English

language. It can mean a settling of differences through mutual concession, but it can also mean a loss of integrity. In the minds of some Americans, like Laura, the line between these two meanings is blurred; at least in politics, mutual concession often entails loss of integrity. In contrast, the civility my interviewees advocate entails no loss of integrity to the extent that it is a unilateral code of conduct. I do what is right regardless of what others do, and if others choose not to follow suit, shame on them. This civil ethic does not suggest, nor does it need compromise or conflict between people in determining how to act. One either chooses to be civil, or one does not.

Discussion: The Limits of Civil Citizenship

Recent survey research reveals a generational decline in at least conventional political engagement (Dalton, 2008; Putnam, 2000;; Wattenberg, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006), but tells us less about how young Americans think about citizenship in their own words. Talking in-depth with young Americans free of the standardizing constraints of surveys can help uncover important nuances in how they think about citizenship, nuances with consequences for American democracy if thinking shapes action. My interviews with young Americans suggest that the habit many political scholars and practitioners have of using "civic engagement" as a catch-all phrase obscures important differences and possible changes in how citizens think about citizenship. Those young Americans I spoke with conceived of the good citizen less as political or even civic than civil. Scholars who study citizen engagement generally recognize the difference between civic and political action, but ignore civility as a distinct and possibly growing form of citizenship.

Civility has received some attention in history and social theory for its role in civilizational development, social control, status distinction and democracy (Bryson, 1998; Caldwell, 1999; Hemphill, 1999; Smith, 1999; Smith, 2002; Elias, 2000; White, 2006; Davetian, 2009). However, thus far scholars who study young Americans' "civic engagement" give mostly passing attention to their focus on considerate conduct and obeying the law in everyday life, and still less attention to the implications of this form of citizenship for politic engagement (Torney-Purta, 2002; Chiodo & Martin, 2005; Zukin et al., 2006). Some current political scholars recognize a disconnect and even tension between civic and political citizenship among young Americans (Macedo et al., 2005; Zukin et al., 2006; Dalton, 2008; Wattenberg, 2008), but not between civil and political citizenship.

My interviews though suggest that the civil terms in which some young Americans interpret good citizenship may help explain their weakened political engagement, and this in at least three ways: polite individualism, proximate reach, and facile, fleeting engagement.

Polite individualism: The civil citizenship my interviewees described is "individualistic" in two distinct senses of the term. First, civil citizens are not just often acting alone when they do civil things, civil citizens think in terms of individual rather than collective action. Thus, to the extent that politics demands collective action – and democratic politics organized on the principle of "one person, one vote" requires collective action for electoral success – it jars with the civil citizen's individualistic sensibility. Further, politics' collective passion does not sit well with the civil citizen's politeness. Lest one imagine such civil citizenship is natural, it is worth remembering that older Americans who experienced the Great Depression and World War II, and even more 18th and 19th century Americans who participated in colonial then mass democratic politics often defined and enacted citizenship in passionately collective rather than politely individual terms (McGerr, 1986; Schudson, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003). Second, civil citizenship is individualistic in a Tocquevillian sense of the term: it gives citizens little reason to step out of the comforts of their private lives with family and friends into the public life of politics with strangers (Tocqueville, 1969, pp. 506-8, 604-5). When civil citizenship demands little more than raising civil kids, obeying the law and being considerate why step into the rough and tumble world of politics? Some of my interviewees did indeed mention voting, paying attention and discussing politics, but such acts were usually treated as virtues more than obligations, as private rather than public acts (i.e., done alone or within one's private circles of friends and family, rather than with wider public circles of fellow citizens), and were raised second to civility in order of mention and the time and words my respondents devoted to them.

Proximate reach: While civility applies widely – to friends and family, neighbors and strangers alike, regardless of color, income, title, lifestyle, etc. – it is usually limited to those with whom one comes into face-to-face contact, whether intimates, acquaintances or strangers. Such proximate reach becomes problematic though in any modern, wealthy societies like the United States, wherein our actions as consumers, workers, taxpayers and voters often have far-reaching consequences on hundreds, thousands, millions, even billions of

strangers we will never meet. One can be eminently civil to the elderly woman next door, and the stranger on the street, yet together as workers, consumers, taxpayers and/or voters wittingly or unwittingly contribute to colossal public problems, from slavery and war to disease and climate change, that affect many more people than our proximate civility touches. It is good to be civil to those around us, but this does not shape our actions as consumers, workers, taxpayers and voters the way politics does. It is in such routine roles more often than as civil or even civic citizens that modern people – and especially Americans, as members of the still most powerful nation in the contemporary world, for better or worse – have their greatest impact on others.

Facile, fleeting engagement: Much like the "random acts of kindness" movement promoted through organizations, websites and books, civil citizenship cannot sustain political citizenship to the extent that its small civilities are usually facile and fleeting engagements while politics regularly demands sustained, often difficult engagement, whether to change a law, elect a candidate, win a court case, or else. And yet, it is political action, *not* civility, that ensures that all poor children get school lunches, that guns are not sold to troubled individuals, that nature and wildlife are protected, that women are allowed to vote and run for office. Or, from a more conservative perspective, it is political action, *not* civility, that ensures that citizens have the right to bear arms, that one's taxes are not too onerous, that one's business is not overburdened with government regulation, that government policies encourage families, or that marriage remains between a man and a woman in the eyes of the state.

Clearly, politics matters to people's lives, and the legitimacy of any democratic state depends in no small part on the political engagement of its citizens. While some political scientists remark that much of politics is usually the province of a minority of activists and politicians (Schattschneider, 1960; Milbrath, 1965), there have been upswings, downturns and changes in American citizenship and in recent decades a trend away from at least conventional political engagement (Schudson, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003; Zukin et al., 2006; Dalton, 2008; Wattenberg, 2008). Political culture is by no means the only factor driving that trend, but it behooves those concerned about political withdrawal to dig deeper into the nature of American political culture, including how ordinary citizens think about politics and citizenship in their own words. My interviews with young American professionals on the meaning of good citizenship suggest

that current scholarly discourse on "civic engagement" not only largely misses civil citizenship, but that to the extent this form entails polite individualism, proximate reach and facile, fleeting engagement it may be the weakest or least engaging form of citizenship.

My interviews raise many questions for further research. Given that my interviews were conducted only in metropolitan Boston, are there regional and urban vs. rural differences in young Americans' conceptions of citizenship as there are in Americans' partisan affiliations (Bishop, 2008; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008)? Are younger Americans in fact more likely than older Americans to define citizenship in civil terms? How do civil, civic and political forms of citizenship relate in the minds and actions of Americans of different generations? Are those who identify more with civil citizenship in fact less likely to act in civic and/or political life? How much of the variation in civil, civic and political action is explained by the kind of citizenship with which one identifies? As noted earlier, my own interviewees claimed more political and civic activity than most Americans, so do other factors counteract their primary identification with civil citizenship, or does the kind of citizenship one identifies with just matter little to actual practice? Many of these questions are probably best answered through regression analysis using survey data, but there is still much qualitative research to be done whether through in-depth interviews and/or participant observation to deepen our understanding of the civil, civic and political, and to better understand the changing nature of American citizenship.

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