Rock & Roll Will Never Die?

A discussion of the seeming failure of Rock the Vote

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Abstract

It is well established in the literature that younger voters (age 18-24) turn out in far fewer numbers than their older counterparts. Some scholars have attributed this fact to theories of life transitions and/or barriers to registration. In this paper, we examine these arguments focusing on the failure of political socialization as the primary culprit. Many hoped that initiatives such as "Rock the Vote" would jump start the socialization process and bring young voters back to the polls. Unfortunately, despite a single election rise in young adult voting in 1992, voting among 18-24 year olds continues to decline.

It has been well established that young adults turn out at the polls in far fewer numbers than their older counterparts (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Highton and Wolfinger 2001, Conway 2000, and many others). In this paper, we examine several theories seeking to explain this phenomenon focusing on the concepts of political socialization and the seeming arrested development of this socialization among young adults. With the dawning discovery that traditional explanations for low voter turnout among young adults fail to fully explain the phenomenon (see Heighton and Wolfinger 2001), we turn to the socialization literature in hope of gaining some purchase on what steps *should* lead a young adult to the polls as well as trying to understand how this process becomes interrupted.

One attempt to "jump-start" the socialization process that emerged in the past decade and a half is the Rock the Vote campaign. Begun by members of the recording industry in 1990 and driven by MTV, Rock the Vote (RTV) sought to re-engage a cynical Generation X and lead them to the voting booth. Reports of the success of the program were widespread in both mainstream media and scholarly works (see www.rockthevote.com, Tindell and Medhurst 1998). Unfortunately, this enthusiasm may have been premature. As we show in the final section of this paper, while turn out among 18-24 year olds did increase in 1992 (the first post-Rock the Vote presidential election) it quickly plummeted in 1996 and has stayed below the 1992 figures since. The "blip" in turnout among young adults seems to have been more of a single election phenomenon than a permanent shift. This suggests the root of the increase may be found in election-specific phenomena, such as the appeal of Bill Clinton to young voters, rather than the result of the RTV campaigns.

RTV campaigns and turnout. With a few notable exceptions (see Burgess, et al 2000) most analyses of RTV are descriptive (e.g. Cloonan and Street 1998, Tindell and Medhurst 1998). This paper, too, is primarily restricted to the realm of the descriptive. As a result, we cannot draw inferences from the apparent trends, but we can present an approach to better understanding the phenomenon.

The paper progresses in several short sections. In the next section, we proceed with an examination of several theories of socialization to discover how young adults learn the norms of political behavior. The following section addresses some of the current research on low turnout among young adults. This leads into a specific discussion of Motor Voter laws which were expected to positively impact turnout among 18-24 year olds. We then look at a history of, and some of the research surrounding, Rock the Vote. Finally, we view the realities of turnout among 18-24 year olds.

Socialization

Several theories exist on how children develop as social beings. One of the more familiar is Bandura's Social Cognitive model (see Figure 1 below). (www.emory.edu/education/mfp/eff.html).

BEHAVIOR

PERSONAL
FACTORS
(Cognitive, affective,
and biological events)

ENVIRONMENTAL
FACTORS
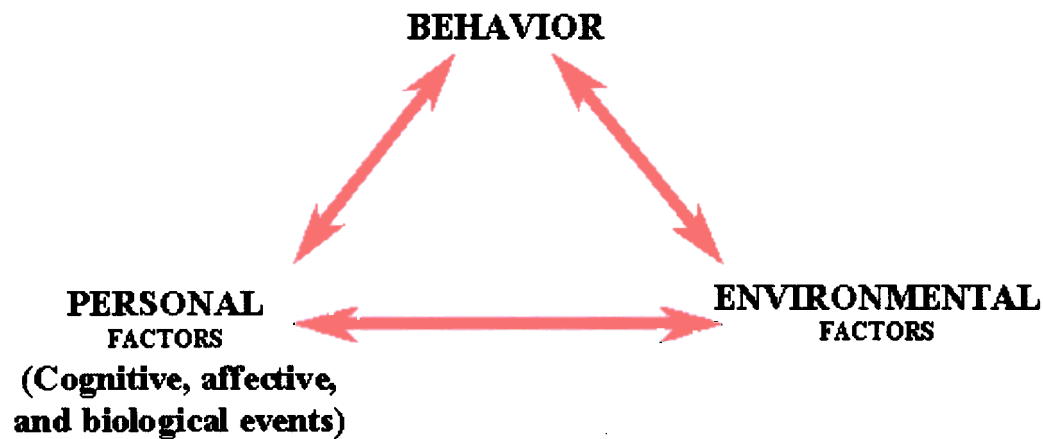
This model explains how children acquire certain measurable behaviors. Bandura's Social

Cognitive Model suggests the features are reciprocal in nature. Accordingly, personal factors are

believed to affect behavior and environmental factors; environmental factors are believed to

affect both personal factors and behavior; and behavior is believed to affect both environmental

and personal factors. In a political engagement view, a child can develop adult participatory

behaviors by learning skills that will allow her or him to be active politically. Engaging in

participatory behaviors as a child, such as voting in the elementary school election for President

of the United States, or observing political participation by others, such as going to the voting

booth with the parent, socialize the child to become an active citizen. Bandura's model helps

demonstrate how children develop "a wide range of such behaviors, thoughts, and feelings

through observing others' behavior. These observations form an important part of children's

development" (Santrock 2001 p.43). Bandura's social cognitive model offers a basis from which

children develop and acquire social knowledge. Others who interact in the child's environment,

such as parents, peers, and teachers, affect how children develop their social understanding. The

generality of this model has pros and cons. Its vagueness makes prediction and precision of

understanding nearly impossible. However, because Bandura's model is so broad it allows for

many factors in the environment to be incorporated into the socialization process These include

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failure to acquire politically engaging behaviors may also be influenced by other environmental factors, such as a negative media portrayal of government, or other personal factors, such as political efficacy.

Yet another theory of development is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development. Bronfenbrenner posits the influence of several outside forces and highlights their interactions. Bronfenbrenner's theory has several layers including the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (see Figure 2 below)(www.transy.edu/homepages/thowe/ftpdpages/bronfenbrenner/JPG). Bronfenbrenner extrapolates on the interactions between individuals and their larger world, starting with the individual characteristics of sex, age, and health. The microsystem is made up of family members and peers who interact closely with the individual. Interactions between microsystems, such as school life and family life, make up the mesosystem. The exosystem acts upon, but is not acted upon by (save for screening behavior), the individual. The exosystem describes an environmental context which is not reciprocal and the individual is the recipient, such as mass media. The macrosystem describes the attitudes and ideologies of the culture, such as nationality or ethnic culture, that influence individual development (Santrock 2001 pp.45-47). The chronosystem deals with socio-historical conditions and larger environmental events. Support for this theory comes from the consideration of the interactions between systems and the understanding of the chronosystem, which takes into account time and certain cohort effects.

Bronfenbrenner's model aids in understanding how individuals develop, whether socially or politically. This model suggests how eclectic development is and gives potential factors for

socialization.

Figure 2
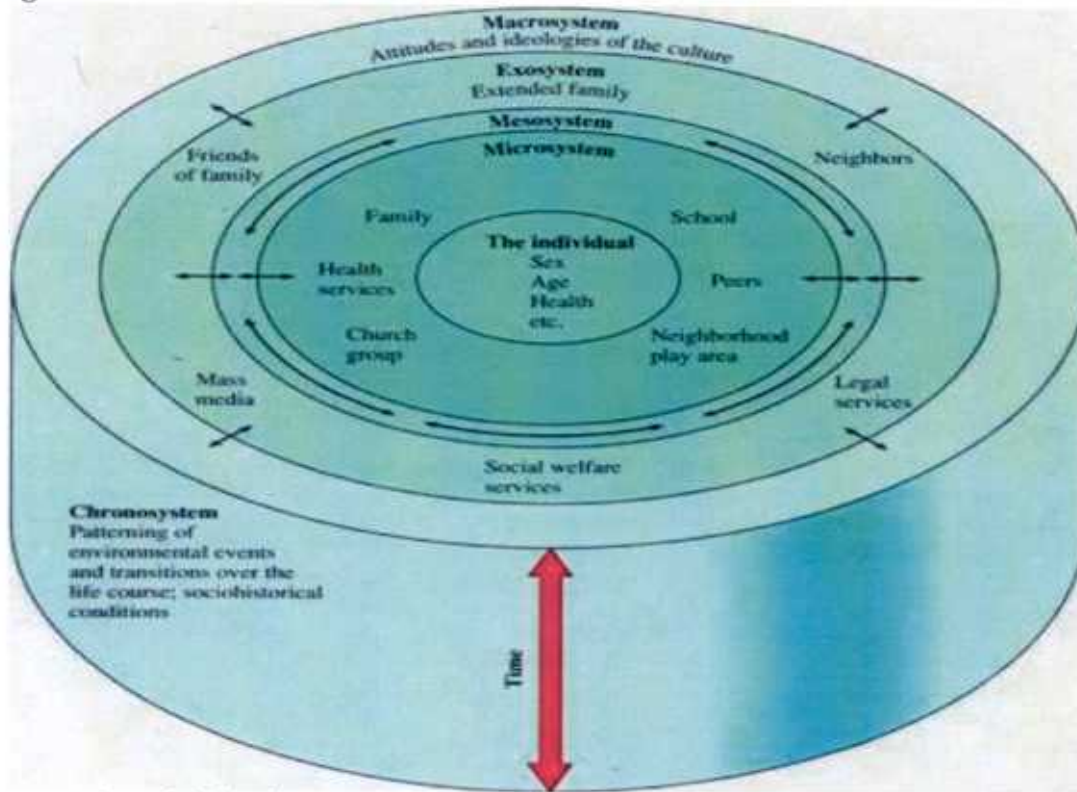
A model that incorporates the progression of the child and young adult through

developmental stages may help put a finer point on how all of the factors noted in the previous

models truly impact political socialization. Therefore, Erikson's model of life-span development

becomes relevant. Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development suggests eight stages of

growth (Santrock, 2001). The more a person can overcome and resolve the difficulties involved

in transitions from one stage to the next (these transitional difficulties are referred to as "crises"),

the healthier they develop. Focusing the fifth stage, where the individual is between the years of

10-20 and first enters the electorate, individuals are dealing with identity versus identity

confusion. The individual in Erikson's model is faced with new dilemmas in regard to the self:

who they are, what they feel, exploration of roles, and what they care about.

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conclusion about how they feel about politics and issues. How can an individual generate an evaluation of political actors with respect to the issues when they have yet to have a full understanding of where they stand on those issues? In order to avoid dealing with identity confusion, individuals in this stage often refuse to decide on a position, and in so doing effectively remove themselves from the political process. Choosing a political identity could be conceived of as a feature of psychosocial development, where an individual has decided on an identity over remaining in a state of confusion. Unfortunately for the researcher, identity confusion often leads individuals to label themselves as political Independents. This results in individuals who are floundering for an identity to be analytically lumped together with those who have found their identity as a "true" Independent.

Further, an individual still committed to remaining open about possible identities may not want to settle on a particular political identity since they may be in a state of confusion in deciding what they care about and prioritizing those issues. Individuals may "achieve identity" in the late teen years and early twenties choosing not to participate during their transition to this identity due to the instability of their preferences. Identity acquisition may be one factor in explaining the resurgence of voting among middle aged adults.

Erikson's sixth developmental stage is intimacy versus isolation and usually occurs in early adulthood. This stage deals with development of intimate relationships with others. Often this stage exhibits the development of healthy relationships with friends and an intimate relationship with a significant other. These intimate relationships allow individuals to generate open communication of ideas and rapport. Naturally, if this communication involves politics, there is the potential to increase participation. However, an individual who feel isolated due to a

the effort to vote because they have few external connections.

Another look at identity and psychosocial development is Marcia's look at resolving an individual's identity crisis. The four types of identity status are achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. Achievement occurs when an individual has experienced a variety of identities and has settled on one. An individual in moratorium has explored several identities and has not settled on an appropriate one for his or herself. Foreclosure means that the individual has settled on an identity that was determined by others (often a predetermined identity imposed on the individual by the adults in her or his life) rather than the individual's own assessment of potential identities. Individuals with diffusion status are overwhelmed by the task of choosing an identity and effectively shut down and make little or no progress in the quest for an identity (Kail, 2000).

In political terms, individuals with achievement status know their identity and the issues that interest them the most. This naturally increases the probability of participation. Individuals in moratorium are dealing with confusion and uncertainty; this complicates their understanding of themselves and the larger world often causing them to refrain from participation. Understanding the impact of foreclosure status on 18-24 year old voting is complicated by the nature of the imposed identity. Certainly, having an identity forced upon you could reduce efficacy, but how the imposed identity truly impacts political behavior is ultimately decided by the predilections of that identity. Individuals with diffusion status would likely abstain from voting because they have yet to decide who they are or what they care about. The assumptions surrounding these levels could likely be developed into further research regarding turnout.

a Downs-ian sense, if the non-transferable costs of voting are too high the individual will choose not to vote (see Downs 1957). The costs of voting include registering, the often Herculean cognitive task of gathering information about races and candidates, childcare, transportation, and accessibility of polling places. Though national and state laws have been enacted that seek to alleviate some of these costs of voting, many still choose to neglect the voting booth (Knack, 1999).

Finally, political efficacy has a significant impact on turnout (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Flanigan and Zingale 1994, Teixeiria 1987, Conway 2000, and many others). It is easy to see how stages of socialization that include feelings of isolation could lower efficacy and, therefore, the likelihood of voting. This begs the broader question of whether initiatives such as Rock the Vote can overcome these hurdles of arrested socialization.

Current Research

Current research tests several competing theories of young adult voting that include hypotheses relating to life transitions, mass media, intervention, political knowledge, evaluations of environment, perceived distance between government and everyday lives, and efficacy. A short examination of the research in this area will help provide pieces that fit into the puzzle of socialization. This will allow us to move to a discussion of Motor Voter and Rock the Vote, two programs that were expected to have a significant positive impact on young adult voting.

Life transitions are those that make an individuals life more stable. These transitions include long term residence, marriage, home ownership, and a steady job. As Highton and Wolfinger (2001) point out, these transitions do not fully explain failure of youth turnout. For

their residence the more likely they are to vote (Highton and Wolfinger 2001, Conway, 2000, and others). Although most life stability theories predict an increase in voting upon graduation and entrance into the "real world", Highton and Wolfinger (2001) find the opposite. Student status increases electoral participation. This fits quite nicely with theories of socialization. Students have more interaction with a common peer group and are likely exposed to more, and more consistent, messages concerning voting. One can imagine how college shapes Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem for each individual and does so in ways that encourage voting. Although some "stability factors" were found to increase electoral participation, the other lifestyle transitions did not seem to increase turnout; in fact, Highton and Wolfinger (2001) write, "transitions to adult roles are an incomplete and predominantly inadequate explanation of youth turnout" (p.207).

"Political literacy," including knowledge about politics and the political process, also increases political participation (Dudley and Gitelson 2002). Young voters are often the least knowledgeable voters in the potential electorate. Though knowledge is affected by education, which has proven time and time again to enhance political participation (Weisberg 1995, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Heighton and Wolfinger 2001 Conway, 2000; and many others), a paradox seems to arise when examining the impact of education on the turnout of young adults. More of America's youth are completing high school and college than ever before, yet electoral participation among this group is decreasing.

Another form of education is service learning, where students go out into their communities and volunteer. Service learning does well to explain an increase in political efficacy and self-reports of engagement both civically and politically among individual students

adults today exhibit greater degrees of volunteerism compared with their older counterparts, but this does not, *prima facie*, seem to translate into greater turnout. Critics of theories of service learning and its impact point to problems of internal consistency including the lack of control groups, no examination of long-term effects, and potentially unreliable self-reports (Galston, 2001). As Galston articulates, "most young people characterize their volunteering as an alternative to official politics, which they see as corrupt, ineffective, and unrelated to their deeper ideals" (p. 220). Contrary to popular belief, volunteerism and higher education levels do not seem to lead to increases in turnout; rather these activities appear to often replace voting as a principal means of participation.

Sherrod et al (2002) suggest, "government and elections may feel too distant from the everyday lives of youth" (p. 265). It is often difficult, if not impossible, to see a tangible impact on one's life from casting a single ballot. On the other hand, the gratification from volunteer work is much more tangible and immediate. By all popular accounts, this type of reward is far more meaningful to generations X and Y than that of performing one's "civic duty" and casting a vote. Government and elections may be too far from the day-to-day goings on in life, but that alone does not explain why youth are different from any other cohort. Nor does it explain why some youth are involved with government and elections while others are not.

Perhaps a better understanding of youth voting comes not from an examination of the distance between everyday lives and government, but rather the development of pro-social, community-oriented behavior and individual personality differences between young voters and non-voters. Sherrod et al (2002) suggest the impact of developmental factors may be different depending on contemporary local, national, or global events, the occurrence of random events,

support for Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem where the impact of external events on one's development depends on the stage of development for that individual, which depends, in part, on his or her biological age. That is, the same event has fundamentally different impacts on different individual depending on their particular stage of development at the time of the event. This would seem to explain why single models of electoral participation do not necessarily work across generations.

A study done by Prester, Rohrmann, & Schellhammer (1987) suggests participatory behavior can be affected by evaluations of one's current environment relative to one's "desired state of well-being." Factors from previous theories of environmental evaluation posited to predict participatory behavior include education, awareness of a problem, and political interest. Additionally, Prester, Rohrmann, and Schellhammer (1987) found that environmental stressors and expected change in environmental quality impact predicted participation. Environmental evaluations allow individuals to recognize that there is a problem with their situation, but "dissatisfaction alone cannot sufficiently explain political action" (p. 754). Individuals must then make a cost-benefit evaluation of the participatory process before putting forth the effort to actually participate. Prester, Rohrmann, and Schellhammer's (1987) observations offer new insight into young adult voting by integrating the cognitive and the developmental. One must conduct a cognitive inventory of one's situation to determine a desired outcome. The nature of the desired outcome would depend, in part, on the individual's stage of development. Once a desired outcome is determined, the individual must cognitively weigh the pros and cons of the pursuit of that outcome. Young voters may be dissatisfied with the system, but see the means at

choice.

Motor Voter

One major event expected to have a significant impact out turnout among young voters was the passage of national Motor Voter legislation. In 1993, President Clinton signed the Motor Voter legislation into act. This legislation changed registration methods of several states to make registration applications available at government public assistance agencies and the DMV. Many studies have been conducted on the affects of the National Voter Registration Act after implementation. Since the act took full effect in 1995, early Motor Voter success was measured by registration and turnout in the 1996 election. Unfortunately, the 1996 election experienced a notable decline in turnout from the 1992 election. Part of the purpose of Motor Voter was to target young and mobile eligible voters. Though voter registration increased, turnout at the polls declined to a new record low. Wolfinger and Hoffman (2001) note, "Our findings are consistent with the proposition that costless registration is associated with an increase in non-voting registrants" (p. 90). While voting is "nested" in registration in that one may not vote unless registered, there are clearly some unexplored dynamics at work.

Even with Motor Voter implementation, fundamental differences among the states, such as closing date and program implementation, still exist. Since closing date is highly correlated with voter registration, difficulty arises when comparing states with thirty-day pre-registration and same day registration (Martinez & Hill, 1999). However, we do know that laws allowing election day registration do increase turnout (see Brians and Grofman 1995). One problem that arose in examining the 1996 presidential election to measure the effect of Motor Voter was that a full cycle of driver's renewals had not come through (Knack, 1999).

Strict voting registration requirements, including early closing date, negatively impacted participation. They found that women are still more likely to register and vote. As suggested before National Voter Registration Act, stricter requirements and delays are likely to have the largest negative effect on the young (Highton and Wolfinger 1998; Parry & Shields, 2001). Parry and Shields examination of Motor Voter found that young women were most significantly affected.

Some scholarship has found success in Motor Voter. Stephen Knack (1999) suggested that the National Voter Registration Act slowed down turnout decline. Differences among reform states and non-reform states were examined and reform states had a small decline in turnout by 3.3 percentage points. Presidential election year of 1996 was a ground breaking low for turnout among nearly all age groups compared with 1992 and 2000. Other phenomenon may have been confounding the data for 1996. As Wolfinger and Hoffman (2001) suggest, "while registration may be the greatest cost of voting, it is not the only hurdle that must be surmounted" (p. 90). Many of these hurdles are likely related to socialization. The question is: can initiatives such as Rock the Vote help overcome these hurdles?

Negative Media

In a study done by the Council for Excellence in Government (1999), the portrayal of government officials in the media has declined since 1975. Since the 1990s, government institutions and public officials have been hit hard by their depiction in modern media. Media depictions often focus on corruption and gridlock. The content of media depictions of government has changed drastically over time. From 1955-1974, the political system was described as honest 65% of the time versus the 1975-1998 when this figure dropped to 38%. The

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between 1955-1974 to 42%; between 1975-1998. Both legal and political systems combined had a decrease from a 76% depiction as "honest" to 40%, respectively (Lichter, Lichter, & Amundson, 1999). Apparently, "television is more critical of government institutions than the individuals who represent them" (p. 105).

Is there any wonder that young citizens do not vote if they perceive the political system as corrupt and the people who represent the system as immoral. Two thirds of Generation Xers surveyed believe "government officials and public servants are accurately portrayed on primetime entertainment network television" (Ducat, 1999). The negative portrayal of government and its workers would be consistent with the cynicism of Generation Xers who were of voting age and those of Generation Y who watched primetime television as children. Children and adults are susceptible to mass media, whether it is positive or negative (Singer & Singer, 2001). Can a media campaign, like Rock the Vote, counter the cynicism created, in part, by media portrayals of government?

Rock the Vote

Rock the Vote began in 1990 as a freedom of speech group advocating artistic expression. In 1991, focus of the group broadened to include "political empowerment of young Americans" (www.rockthevote.com). Throughout the 1990s, Rock the Vote sponsored several initiatives to get young voters out to the polls during Presidential election years. In 1992, Rock the Vote ran public service announcements (PSAs) on a variety of networks including MTV, VH-1, BET, and Fox. Fox ran a Rock the Vote television special with numerous celebrities. In 1996, Rock the Vote produced 1-800-REGISTER, a registration by phone program, went on a bus tour with MTV's "Choose or Lose" Bus, generated a website (NetVote96) to offer on-line

In 2000, Rock the Vote continued with the bus tour, concert tours, and on-line registration. New PSAs are created and new initiatives, such as Rap the Vote and the Southwestern Voter Participation Project, are specifically targeting African-Americans and Latinos. In off-years, Rock the Vote conducts a variety of activities including support of the NVRA, lobbying for the National and Community Service Trust Act, distributing pamphlets on health issues relevant to young people, lobbying against anti-First Amendment legislation, and encouraging civic service in communities. All in all, Rock the Vote seems to live up to their mission statement, "Rock the Vote is dedicated to protecting freedom of expression and empowering young people to change their world" (http://www.rockthevote.com/rtv_timeline.phl). But are they effective?

Tindell and Medhurst (1998) argue that Rock the Vote had great success. They look at the Rock the Vote campaign in the 1992 presidential election and compare the effectiveness of Rock the Vote to initiatives by two other advertising agencies, Advertising Council and Texas Voter Enhancement campaign. Though all three advertisers promote the sense of duty in voting, Rock the Vote uses a greater variety of avenues to reach young people. Rock the Vote's phrase in 1992 was "GET LOUD, Rock the Vote," which resonated more closley with young people's predispositions. The PSAs appealed to young people due to their likeness to music videos, use of sexual imagery, modern film techniques, repetition, and ability to blend in with MTV programming (Tindell and Medhurst, 1998). Tindell and Medhurst (1998) point to the dramatic increase in young adult turnout in 1992; however, their declaration of victory may have been premature as 1996 and 2000 witnessed precipitous drops in turnout among 18-24 year olds.

Other research studies Rock the Vote in a more experimental manner and examined the 1996 Rock the Vote campaign. Burgess et al (2000) conducted a study with pledge cards used

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and self-perception are factors that may impact voting. Two different pledge cards were available as post cards. These cards were self addressed. One post card had a self-prompt, "I will vote because _____ with the participant filling in the blank, versus a card simply stating "I will rock the system by exercising my right to vote on November 5, 1996." Individuals completing the post card with the self-prompt were more likely to participate. Other significant predictors were previous participation and gender, with females being more likely to vote. Burgess et al (2000) determined a "positive effect of personal contact on encouraging a behavior may be enhanced if individuals are simply asked to generate meaningful reasons for that behavior" (p. 1, electronic version).

Conclusion

In order to truly test whether exposure to Rock the Vote initiatives positively impacted turnout among young voters, we need data that measure these two variables. Unfortunately, to the knowledge of these authors, there is no available data that simultaneously measure these two variables for individuals 18 to 24 years old. For the most part, this relegates us to discussing circumstantial evidence.

Since Motor Voter and life transitions are not bringing America's youngest eligible voters to the polls, it seems entirely possible that the roots of their electoral apathy lie somewhere in the arrested socialization process. If true, programs such as Rock the Vote appear aimed at jump-starting the socialization process, or at least rescuing it from arrested development. Had Rock the Vote been successful in this manner, we should have seen an upward shift in young adult voting behavior that persisted for the duration of the program. Unfortunately, even though Rock the Vote is still going strong, voting among young adults has

Figures 3 and 4 show turnout percentages for young adults between 1976 and 2000. Data for

Table 1 and Figures 3 and 4 come from Current Population Reports.[1]

Table 1

Presidential Election Turnout Among 18-24 Year Olds, 1976-2000

	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
18	34.2%	31.0%	33.0%	32.6%	36.8%	29.8%	26.7%
19	39.3%	37.5%	37.2%	31.7%	39.0%	30.5%	29.5%
20	40.5%	38.8%	39.9%	35.5%	39.9%	33.4%	29.2%
21	41.9%	38.5%	39.5%	35.1%	43.4%	31.3%	32.7%
22	44.5%	42.8%	43.7%	37.0%	46.4%	34.2%	38.1%
23	47.4%	44.4%	45.7%	39.9%	45.8%	35.3%	34.2%
24	48.8%	46.8%	45.0%	40.9%	47.3%	32.7%	36.7%

[1] Universe is civilian non-institutionalized population

1976   U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 322, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1976*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1978. Table 1

1980   U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 370, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1980*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1982. Table 1

1984   U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 405, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1984*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1986. Table 1

1988   U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 440, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1988*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1989. Table 1

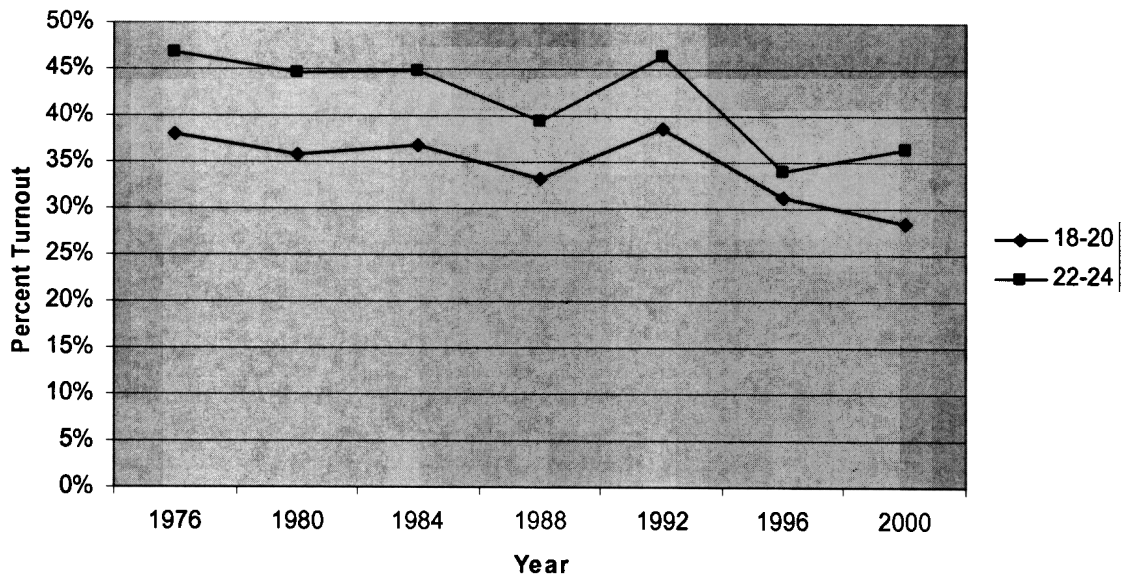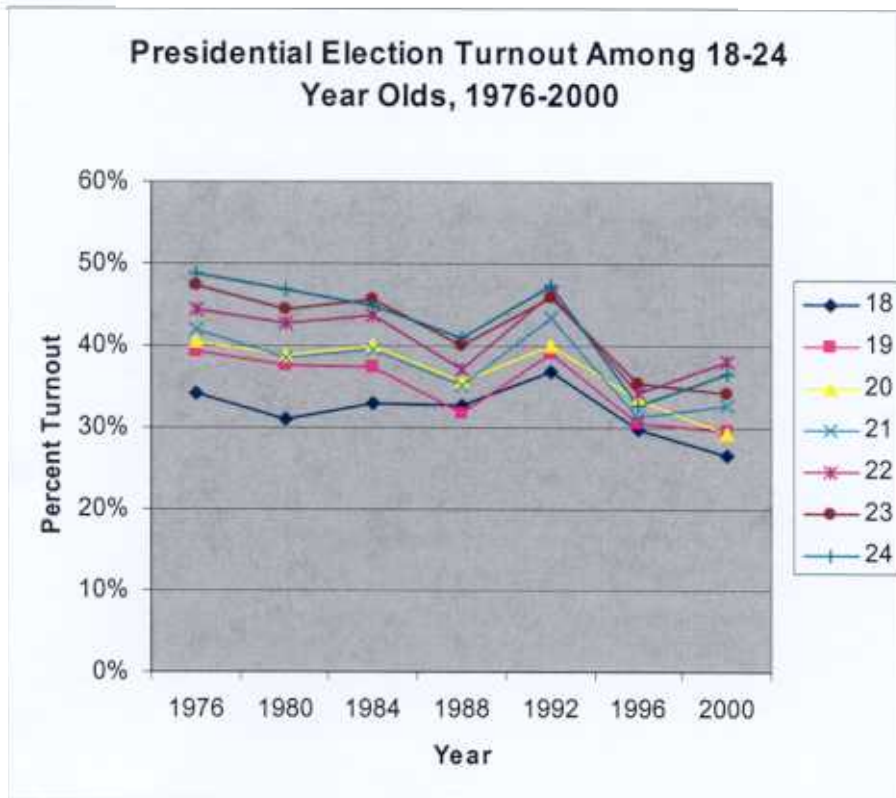# Weighted Mean Turnout Among Voters 18-20 v. 22-24, 1976-2000

Figure 4

However as the data demonstrate, the 1992 surge was a single election phenomenon. Short of arguing that a host of heretofore unknown factors came into play in the 1996 and 2000 elections, it seems likely that the causes for the surge in young adult turnout lie in some election-specific phenomenon, such as Clinton's appeal to young voters.

Rock the Vote seems, at best, to achieve the results with respect to young adult voting that Wolfinger and Hoffman (2001) ascribe to Motor Voter: an increase in non-voting registrants. As dismal a picture as this paints about the process of socializing young Americans to become voters, it may be worse than we realize. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Generation Y is even more cynical and less prone to electoral participation. An examination of Figure 3 gives circumstantial evidence for this. Turnout among 18-20 year olds hit an historic low of 28.4% in 2000. This is Gen Y. Perhaps this, like the upward surge of 1992, is a single election phenomenon. If not, serious attention needs to be applied to the task of integrating the socialization and voting literatures in hope of understanding this trend.

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