Political Dropouts and the Effects of Participatory Innovations: What Ontario got Wrong and Norway gets Right

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Abstract A number of innovations have been introduced to reduce the democratic deficit. I am particularly concerned about the deficit as reflected in the decline in voting at elections among young citizens, and, more widely, the apparent decline in attentiveness to (and, thus, knowledge of) political life. The result is a large number of political dropouts, a phenomenon that tends to be ignored in the literature on alternate forms of political engagement. In a number of democratic countries, a majority can be characterized as political dropouts. I first portray this situation, drawing on comparative, generational indicators of political participation and knowledge. The main part of the paper looks for ways to address this state of events in the form of innovations that aim to promote participation and improve democratic skills what is being done, and needs to be done.

My recent work (Milner 2002, 2010) is concerned with what I term civic literacy, i.e. the knowledge and skills required to make sense of the political world. Levels of civic literacy, i.e. the proportion of the population with such skills and knowledge, are low and declining, and there are significant differences between high and low civic literacy countries. The high civic literacy countries are especially those in Scandinavia and Northern Europe that engage in policies I term non-material redistribution, in such areas as adult education, communications, libraries, civic education, etc. I find a close relationship between material and non-material redistribution (see Figure 1.1, which shows that countries that redistribute income have lower disparities in levels of literacy). These differences, it appears, prevail among the Internet generation, i.e. those 18-30, the first to grow up with the Internet, and among whom civic literacy is low. Citizens lacking the minimum level of knowledge needed to make sense of the political world are termed political dropouts. Among young people, they are better termed potential political dropouts. Such dropouts are concentrated among those with relatively low levels of education. What distinguishes the high civic literacy countries is that they are much better at reducing this. Figure 1.2 shows that compared to the population as a whole, citizens as poorly educated citizens in countries in Scandinavia and northern Europe are more politically knowledgeable than elsewhere.

In this paper, based on my latest book (Milner 2010) I focus on innovations...
that reduce the proportion of political dropouts, looking to the high civic-literacy countries for inspiration. I conclude that, unless appropriate innovations are introduced in civic education and in complementary political institutional reforms, the likely consequence of the Internet Generation’s low level of political attentiveness will be a continuing decline in civic literacy. If we wish to boost the informed political participation of young citizens, the core challenge lying before us is that of identifying policies that could prevent young people from becoming political dropouts by facilitating their developing the habits of political attentiveness. To illustrate what an appropriate civic-education approach entails, I draw upon the example of Norway, contrasting it with the experience in Ontario.

Democratic Innovations that Address - or at Least do not ignore - the Potential Political Dropouts

The Political Participation and Political Knowledge of the Internet Generation

While those who vote may engage in other forms of political engagement, the evidence is clear that, despite the frequent claim to the contrary, few of those who do not vote participate otherwise. An analysis of the results of a survey of 14-year olds in the 24-nation IEA study found “no overall shift in post-materialist societies from voting to more active, issue-specific forms of participation. Rather…except in the USA, teenagers in the most post-materialist countries, such as the Nordic countries, predict [for themselves] the least diversified range of activism” (Ammà, Munck and Zetterberg 2004:35). Generalizing from cross-national data, Gidengil et al. (2004: 142) conclude that “the affluent and the highly educated are the most likely to sign petitions, join in boycotts, and attend lawful demonstrations, just as they are more likely to vote, to become members of political parties, and to join interest groups.”

Hence declining turnout reflects declining political participation. Table 2.1 compares reported voting among young voters to that of the population as a whole in European countries. The generational difference is only in part a matter of life cycles, as is well illustrated in Figure 2.1 derived by Wass (2008) from the unusually detailed generational data on turnout in Finland. The important exception to the story of decline is the United States, which saw a reversal in the presidential elections of 2004 and 2008, in which, as displayed in Table 2.2, youth voting rose. However, to judge by the 2010 mid-terms, this tendency has come to an end. CIRCLE estimates that the 2010 youth (18-29) turnout rate was 20.9%. Using the same method and the same adjusted tallies from past mid-term elections, youth turnout was 23.5% in 2006, 20.9% in 2002, 23.6% in 1998, and 23.9% in 1994.¹

Turning to political knowledge, there are indications of a parallel overall decline (though it is much harder to identify knowledge level changes over time, since the difficulty of an indicator can vary). The data from the IEA student survey, despite its limitations,² are telling in this regard. In 2009, 140 000 grade 8 students took part in 38 countries surveyed. Fifteen of these took part in a previous IEA study of civic education in 1999. As we can see in Table 2.3., in seven there has been a significant decline in civic content knowledge since 1999; only in Slovenia has there been a significant increase.

Data shows that in the US, the UK and Canada political knowledge is especially low, with a significant difference between the youngest group and everyone else. We can see this in the results of the National Geographic-Roper Global Geographic Literacy Survey, (see Table 2.4) which assessed the knowledge of political
geography of 3,250 young adults in 2002.\textsuperscript{3} Out of 56 total questions asked across the ten countries surveyed, the average young American answered 23 questions correctly (just above last-place Mexican youth), with young persons in Canada (27) and Great Britain (28) faring almost as poorly. Sweden (40) and Germany (38) led, followed by Italy (38), France (34) and Japan (31).

\textit{The Effect of Changing Information Media}

How are we to explain these cross national and generational differences? The most important factor, we should note at the outset, is family background, one that we do not examine per se, since this is a given impervious to policy choices. Young people who have grown up in homes where political and social issues were discussed, which correlates strongly with parental education, are far more likely to be politically knowledgeable and involved. McIntosh, Hart, and Youniss (2007; see also Kahne and Sporte (2008) found that growing up in such a family has a much stronger effect than even parents’ income and occupation on adolescents’ ‘civic outcomes’. In a comparative study of three stable democracies and four Eastern European transitional ones, Flanagan et al. (1998) found a strong and robust relationship between family values and the public interest concerns of 12–18 year olds.

A second factor, media use, is amenable to policy choices. In my earlier work, I showed a clear relationship between newspaper reading levels – and the media related policies that lay behind them - and civic literacy, something we can see by looking at the ranking of countries in Table 2.5. A similar ranking prevails in terms of Internet access (Table 2.6). The Internet’s arrival signals a simultaneous, integrated transformation of the nature of the content (text, pictures, video, sound, and graphics - combined, in much higher resolution). Its effect can be compared to that of television, but only after the arrival of the remote control and cable and satellite transmission. Prior (2007) found no link between the political knowledge of respondents without access to cable or Internet and their degree of preference for entertainment, but “for those with access to cable television…moving from low to high entertainment preference corresponds to a 20 percent drop in political knowledge.” Henceforth viewers, with minimal effort, could avoid political news. The result was a deeper political knowledge gap between those following news and those avoiding it, a gap that could only grow with the Internet.\textsuperscript{4}

It is too early to attempt to establish the overall effect of the Internet on political participation. We do know that Internet use exacerbates the tendency that arrived with the multi-chanelled TV universe, in which content is internally selected, ordered and, potentially, created.\textsuperscript{5} As a result, power shifts from institutions to networks and from bordered territories to cyberspace, transcending geographical and hierarchical restrictions. Faster information gathering enhances political engagement for the digitally sophisticated but widens the digital divide between them and others.\textsuperscript{6} But the social media may narrow that divide. Smith et al. (2009) raise this possibility in a recent study, noting that a potential exception to the Internet’s widening the class-based gap in political participation may lie in social networking, since 78 percent of those under twenty-five are found to engage in such activities. Nevertheless, the authors warn,

Many forms of political engagement on these venues do not fall squarely under the rubric of a definition of political participation…. A social networking site like Facebook is more a forum for political talk than for organized political effort… “Friending” a candidate is not the same as working in a campaign.... Among those who are politically engaged on social networking sites,
44 percent are students... The educational component of their eventual SES will, by definition, rise .... Thus, we consider it premature to conclude... that interactive forms of online political participation hold the key to unlocking the association between political participation and socio-economic status.

Indeed it is premature. I contend that the possibility of online communication “unlocking” the association between political participation and socio-economic status, if anywhere, lies in initiatives targeting potential political dropouts. This is the subject of the next section of this article.

Innovations in Enhancing Youth Political Participation

The Civic Education Gap

Unlocking the potential of Internet based communications to reduce the number of political dropouts, I argue, is primarily a question of effectively applying such communication techniques. There is no comprehensive comparative analysis of the effects of civic education on political participation, but we do know from numerous specific cases that civic education can, when done well, raise levels of political knowledge. To the extent that such programs target, or at least do not miss, the potential political dropouts, they can also be expected to raise levels of political participation.

The irony is that civic education tends to be provided least where it can have the most benefit especially in the low-civic literacy countries. A recent study of US high school civic education opportunities (Kahne and Middaugh 2008) found that a student’s race and academic track, as well as a school’s average socioeconomic status (SES) determines the availability of the school-based civic learning opportunities that promote voting and broader forms of civic engagement. In a more comprehensive study, Wilkenfeld (2009) identified a “civic engagement gap” among American adolescents, The most disadvantaged are male, black, American Indian, immigrant, and low-SES youth. Wilkenfeld controlled for inequalities in civic experiences in school and the overall school environment, finding that the civic engagement gaps between racial minority, low SES and higher SES white students was significantly reduced. In neighborhoods with high poverty levels, confidence in future political participation was positively associated with students’ civic knowledge. The fuller the school’s civic curriculum, the higher the overall confidence in political participation, a relationship especially pronounced in high-poverty neighborhoods (See Figure 3.1). These studies suggest that in the United States at least, appropriately targeted civic education can narrow the SES-based political attentiveness, knowledge and participation gap between different groups of students.

What about high civic literacy countries? A recent Finnish study based on data from the 1999 IEA Civic Education Study of 15-year-olds found that Finnish pupils who have taken civic education at school have more civic knowledge and skills, are more involved in politics and more confident about voting in the future than pupils who have not attended such education courses. The author concludes that “civic education makes it possible to reduce polarization as the role of school can become particularly important for those pupils whose family is politically passive” (Nurmi 2011).

From the above I conclude that especially in societies where there are wide gaps due to weak efforts at material and non-material redistribution, the US in particular, but also Canada, the crucial factor is the targeting of civic education at potential political dropouts. But targeting is also a matter of content, or course design - which brings us back to high-civic literacy countries, with their relatively high level of
youth voting and political knowledge. What can we learn from the experiences of these countries if we seek to make it possible for the majority of citizens to effectively make inputs into policy decisions, both as voters, and through more direct forms of participation? What policy interventions are likely to promote political attentiveness among (the potential political dropouts in) the Internet Generation? Clearly the primary terrain for such intervention is the school, and the primary means of such intervention is civic education. After surveying what we know from the literature (Milner 2010), I conclude that for civic education to be effective it must:

- be certain to include if not directly target potential political dropouts
- apply innovative techniques that correspond to the students own forms of communication and expectations in such a way as to allow for discussion of political issues over which there are partisan disagreements. This entails use of:
  - simulations, that permit hands-on rather than passive learning, and
  - use of sophisticated Internet technology allowing for two-way rather than top-down communications

Using simulations

Parliamentary simulations are used in many countries. As a rule, parliamentary simulations, however sophisticated, do not meet our first criterion, namely including as targets potential political dropouts. Typically, parliamentary simulations address the already politically interested. The same can be true of the electoral simulations carried out in the schools in many democratic countries, but if carried out effectively with access to appropriate human and financial resources, this need not be the case. A study for the National board of Youth Affairs, (Sverigesungdomstyrelsen) of Skolval 2006, Sweden’s nationally coordinated school elections, found that 70 percent of eligible young people in the academic stream and 60 percent of the vocational programs took part. Table 3.1 shows a very positive response to the simulation, especially among the foreign born, a particular target of the effort.

Similar numbers take part in the Norwegian Skolevalg which stands out for its being integrated into the civic education program. Skolevalg has been running mock elections since 1989 for parliamentary and local elections. It also carries out a survey of students, with a similar survey among a representative population sample, before the election (which allows for longitudinal comparison of age differences in attitudes). Overall results are reported online, while school results are distributed to the schools, so students can compare their choices with those of their peers.

Both the mock and real elections are well integrated into Norwegian civic education. Students study political parties
and their programs, visit them, make projects where they present party platforms in class, and role play as representatives of political parties. The courses are structured so that the section on elections and parties can coincide with the campaigns (facilitated by a system of immoveable fixed election dates). This is complemented by the textbooks, which stress forms of political participation, from membership in the parties or interest groups to street marches and demonstrations. In his content analysis, Borhaug (2011) finds that the textbooks convey “three quite different ideas of what makes political participation worthwhile:

As an individual, you may affect policy outcomes to suit your preferences; All citizens has an obligation and general interest in upholding democracy, this implies some participation; It is possible to be young and politically engaged and active, this is an available identity.... At a general level these ideas are found in all the textbooks and there are no distinguishable alternative profiles among the textbooks. It is likely that the textbooks resemble each other because they are influenced by the same Norwegian political culture in general, curricular context and didactical tradition in particular (Borhaug, forthcoming).

Also integrated into the Norwegian civic education process is, from the point of view of this paper, the most interesting example of effective use and targeting of simulation, the *Minitinget*. (There is a similar such simulation for the Swedish *Riksdag* in Stockholm called the *Democracy Workshop*). The *Minitinget*, opened in September 2005, is located next to the *Storting* (Parliament) in Oslo. Each of about 25 students in a typical civic education class is assigned the role of an individual legislator and party, and placed on a committee mandated to deal with one of two issues. Once assigned their committee, the students go to their parties’ caucus rooms, where they work out a position on the issue. They are guided in their deliberations by instructions on a computer screen in the booth, with access to relevant newspaper articles and excerpts from TV and radio coverage. Deliberations are interrupted by calls and computer screen messages from lobbyists, constituents, and party leaders. They even answer questions posed by real journalists in a mock press conference. They then go to committee rooms where they carve out compromises to try to win majority support. The bills then come to the plenary in a mock session of Parliament, with speeches for and against each measure, and a vote is taken. Finally, the students vote again, this time based on their own views, and discuss how these evolved during the simulation. The three-hour *Minitinget* session is typically combined with a visit to the *Storting*.

From my observations, this innovation fits the criteria outlined above. The simulations are not targeted at the already politically aware but at all, including potential political dropouts. The civics teacher I spoke to observed that its hands-on nature seems to be especially appreciated by less articulate boys, who are passive in their relationship to the more traditional aspects of civic education. With three civics classes visiting daily during the school year, most 15-16 year old Norwegians are able to participate in the *Minitinget* once during their two years of civic education at the upper secondary level (see Appendix 1).

The various elements of the civics course are integrated, from the training of civics teachers, to the curriculum and the textbooks, which were revamped by the education department in 2005 as part of an effort to improve civic education and encourage youth political participation. There is some indication that in Norway the educational reform may have had a positive effect. *Table 3.2* captures turnout data in recent Norwegian elections. As we can see, declining youth turnout went hand in hand with declining overall turnout until the most recent national election in 2009, the first in which students affected by the educational
reform were eligible to vote. In 2009, youth turnout rose, yet that of other age groups declined. However, since the numbers are relatively small, it is too early to do anything more than speculate that the efforts to address young people has paid off. Given the low youth turnout in local elections in 2007, the results of the local elections to take place this year (2011) could prove revealing in this regard.

The Ontario Case

It is difficult, of course, to link civic education to quantitative indicators of political participation, but an interesting contrast with Norway is provided by Ontario as highlighted in a study I carried out (see Milner 2010). I looked at the possible effects on turnout in subsequent elections due to the introduction of compulsory civic education in Ontario – the only province to do so – in 2000 for all grade 10 students. The contrast with Norway could not be greater. In the former, the (half-semester) course was introduced hastily, imposing an additional burden on the students and schools who were given no additional resources – nor was there any provision for training civics teachers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that low seniority was the major criterion for teachers being given responsibility for this course. Among the first year university students I recently queried, the great majority reacted negatively to their experience in the course three years earlier.

The study took the form of a natural experiment about the effects of this course. Among the eighteen- to twenty-four year-olds eligible to vote in both the 2004 and 2006 elections, there were young Ontarians who had taken this course, and others who had not, identifiable by their birth dates. Moreover, since no other province instituted compulsory courses during that time, the level of turnout in 2004 and 2006 of Ontario young people who had been required to take the course and those who were too old to have done so can be compared with the same age groups in the other provinces, the latter serving as a control group for this natural experiment. I was able to gain access to age-based turnout data from Elections Canada, which, because of declining turnout, made an unusual effort to amass such data. The results of the experiment for each election are presented in tables 3.3 and 3.4. The cutoff ages for the 2004 and 2006 elections provide two categories (for Canada as a whole, Ontario, and the rest of the country): young people who would normally have reached tenth grade before the compulsory civics course was introduced in Ontario (the bottom rows of the tables), and those who reached tenth grade earlier (the top rows; the upper cutoff age for this category was chosen to give a roughly equal sample of the two groups). The numbers are thus greater in 2006, since more students who had taken the course were now at voting age.

If there is a positive relationship between civic education and voting, it is not found in the tables. Indeed, the numbers point in the opposite direction. In 2004, the subgroup of Ontarians at an age to have taken the course turned out at the same level (38.2 percent) as those older who did not (38.8), while there was an improvement for the corresponding age groups in the rest of Canada, from 34.5 percent to 37.1 percent. Such a small difference may be dismissed as merely statistical, except that it grew significantly in 2006: those young Ontarians of an age to have taken the course had a much lower turnout (41.8 percent) than those who were not (46.8), while this time there was no difference between the corresponding age groups in the rest of Canada (40.2 and 40.0 percent). Given the confidence limits (in parentheses) for the data, it is still possible that the difference is only in the samples and not among the overall population. In any case, we are thus left with the plain fact of the failure of compulsory civics education to boost turnout, the low level of which had prompted its introduction. The explanation must lie in the course itself, and the context in which it was introduced.

Voting Advice Applications
A related innovation are Voter Advice Application (VAA’s), like the “votecompass” introduced in Canada’s latest election. These can also be used to positively affect youth informed participation. In the months leading up to an election, visitors to the site are asked to give their opinions on about 30 propositions to which representatives of the parties have already been invited to respond.

It is my hope that in the future Votecompass’ successors will make better use of its real potential for contributing to political knowledge and attentiveness. Vote match systems in other countries allow users not only to find out where each party stands on each question, but also to view the arguments underlying those positions, as well as relevant facts and figures. If these changes were incorporated into future versions, it could more readily be incorporated into civic education classes and, potentially, raise low Canadian levels of youth political participation and informedness.

In so doing Canada could look to the Wahlomat in Germany. The Wahlomat is operated by the BPB (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung), the federal agency responsible for civic education materials. Understandably, thus, young voters are a priority of the Wahlomat. Wahlomat information is incorporated into the civic education materials, and a simple form of the Wahlomat is addressed to young people. In the 2009 election, in cooperation with local educational authorities, the BPB organized public question-and-answer assemblies in a score of upper-secondary schools in two states, Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate. A simulation was created in which politicians’ responses to the Wahlomat on a big screen served as a basis for political discussion of the issues.

A similar application of VAAs to young people characterizes, among others, the Swiss VAA, Smartvote. Parteienkompass, an adapted version of smartvote’s issue matching system that operates outside of elections, includes questions on political values, with questions presented in a language adapted to the needs of students and users with a relatively low level of political knowledge and interest. It also features a database providing comprehensive information about Switzerland’s main political parties. There are complementary materials for students and teachers, allowing them to download documents covering the issue-matching system as well as information about the electoral system and the political parties derived from the database. The project was carried out in cooperation with a textbook publisher, hep, which also provides information about Parteienkompass in its newsletter, which is sent to almost every school in Switzerland. Hep also organizes training programs and workshops for civic education teachers, illustrating how to integrate Parteienkompass into civic education classes. In addition, in an effort to reach young citizens who have left school, Smartvote made available a shorter and more simply worded VAA known as Myvote, and joined forces with 20 Minuten, Switzerland’s most widely read free daily newspaper, which runs the most popular Swiss online community information platform targeted at those under 35.

Conclusion

There are other promising innovations that could be included here; but the above serve the purposes of this paper. As stated at the outset, if we are concerned with increasing citizen input into democratic decision making, we need to be concerned that citizens have the knowledge and skills to effectively make such inputs. To boost the informed political participation of the citizens of the future, we need to focus on measures to prevent young people from becoming political dropouts, drawing lessons especially from the high civic literacy countries. While the examples set out in the above section present only an
incomplete picture, they do provide some guidelines as to the kind of innovations we should be seeking.

We have stressed an approach to civic education that targets the potential political dropouts using simulations that effectively apply the communications technology of the Internet generation. We have noted also the possibilities in the appropriate application of Voting Advice Applications to the civic education classroom and beyond. In concluding, we need to take note of a relevant dimension the exploration of which is beyond the scope of this paper. It is that of political institutions. Two salient aspects can be mentioned here. First, fixed election dates, such as Norway’s system of alternating, every second September, national and local elections, facilitate incorporating election simulations and other election related activities into civic education programs.

Secondly, adopting proportional electoral systems. The principle is a simple one: the institutional arrangements must invite the expression of relevant positions on current issues in the political arena in a manner predictable and understandable to the ordinary citizen. This is a principle that could beneficially be applied to all innovations seeking to enhance democratic participation.

WORKS CITED


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1 In predominantly Democratic (“blue”) states, youth turnout was 18.8%. In predominantly Republican (“red”) states, turnout was 22.6%. In competitive (“purple”) states, turnout was 23.6%. In states targeted by several non-partisan youth voting groups, youth turnout was 21.4%. In the states least targeted by those groups, the turnout was 20.5%.
To gain approval of the national representatives, one assumes, questions were eliminated that might appear to place a given country at a disadvantage, i.e., the factual questions. What remained in the end were items measuring the students’ familiarity with democratic concepts and skills in interpreting political communication. Rather than testing factual knowledge, the questionnaire tested vocabulary, logic, and appreciation for democratic principles.

Two examples: “The Taliban and al Qaeda movements were both based in which country?” “Which two countries have had a longstanding conflict over the region of Kashmir?”

For most of the 126 students in an Ohio University intro US politics course, mean age 19 (Miller 2010) the Internet is primary news source. Each has a cellular phone; all but 5 an active Facebook account (average use one hour a day, half the time spent on the Internet). While 79% could name no Supreme Court justice, 77% could identify 3 American Idol judges, and 68% could identify no news anchors (Brian Williams, Katie Couric, and Charlie Gibson).

Even newspapers are affected. “I can no longer file a story in our computer system without filling out a box, a small gray square that may well determine the future of serious journalism. The box is supposed to contain words and phrases that will help me reel you in. Search has become a journalistic obsession on the Web, and with good reason. Most people don't read publications online, patiently turning from national news to Metro to Style to the sports section. They hunt for subjects, and people, in which they're interested. Our mission -- and we have no choice but to accept it -- is to grab some of that traffic that could otherwise end up at hundreds of other places, even blogs riffing off the reporting that your own publication has done. If you appease the Google gods with the right keywords, you are blessed with more readers. So carried to a hypothetical extreme, an ideal headline would be, ‘Sarah Palin rips non-Muslim Obama over mosque while Lady Gaga remains silent.’” Howard Kurtz, “Appeasing the Google Gods” Washington Post, Sept 7, 2010.

Using administrative data on North Carolina students, Vigdor and Ladd (2010) corroborate earlier findings of broad racial and socioeconomic gaps in home computer access and use. The introduction of home computer technology is associated with modest but statistically significant and persistent negative impacts on student math and reading test scores. Moreover, providing universal access to home computers and high-speed internet access would likely broaden, rather than narrow, math and reading achievement gaps.

Relevant information (in Norwegian) can be found at:
http://www.tinget.no/no/Toppmeny/Minitinget/Praktisk-Informasjon