

2008

## Conversations on citizenship: young people's perceptions and performances of democratic citizenship

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CONVERSATIONS ON CITIZENSHIP:  
YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS AND  
PERFORMANCES OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by  
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B.A., Louisiana State University, 2001  
May, 2008

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how the practice of democratic citizenship compares to ideals of it. I hope to provide a clear view of what contemporary democratic citizenship means, how this conception has been formed, and how democratic citizenship can be effectively practiced to serve the ideals held by democratic citizens. To do this, this paper will be comprised in several parts. After an initial explanation of the theoretical perspective used, I will explore how democracy was understood and implemented in the formative stages of United States government. Next I review contemporary practices of citizenship before examining how presidential primary debates are a reflection of contemporary democracy. Finally, I talk with young people about their perceptions and performances of citizenship. In these conversations I hope to learn how the meaning of citizenship impacts their actions as democratic citizens.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars often call for greater civic literacy and engagement, but these approaches often stem from an ideal understanding of participatory democracy that may not be realizable through the constitutionally implemented representative form of democracy that currently exists in the United States. Although the American government is often spoken of as a democracy, a republican form of government has been implemented in the United States through the Constitution and continues to guide the political process today. The confusion between these two systems may be partly responsible for the disgust (Patterson 2002) and feelings of inefficacy (Bennett, 1998; Patterson, 2002; Zukin et al., 2006) that reign over the consciousness of the modern disengaged public.

In fact, democracy may be the wrong term to describe the system of government in the United States. In his influential work *Democracy and its Critics*, Robert Dahl (1991) uses the term polyarchy to refer to the representative system of government in which members of the voting public choose elected officials to make policy decisions for them. This version of democracy, implemented through the United States Constitution, is a marked departure from the more idealistic democracy discussed by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, which views representation as inherently undemocratic and a relinquishing of the individual's sovereignty.

Whichever way government in the United States is defined, the realities of a large scale democratic government differ markedly from the ideals of democratic government taken from the Greek city-state (Dahl, 1991). And these different versions of democracy require different versions of citizenship. While an ideal democracy requires citizens take personal part in policy making decisions and have a high store of information regarding government matters, more representative versions require much less input from the citizen. Confusion over the rights and responsibilities of modern day citizenship, then, is hardly surprising from a system of

government with elusive standards. What we expect of citizens, then, is also highly elusive. If academic scholars have difficulty agreeing on the United States' system of government, citizens themselves can hardly be expected to understand their role in the governing process. Because of this, a gap appears to exist between our ideals of citizenship and the realistic expectations we can place on average citizens. This gap may be partially responsible for the general disengagement that seems to pervade the modern day political process in the United States (Barnhurst, 2003; Buckingham, 2000).

This paper is, in one aspect, an attempt to rectify the divergent discussion, examining the ideals of the democratic process against the real life historical and institutional limitations faced by citizens. If we hope to mend the gap between ideal versions of citizenship and the real-life peripheral nature of citizenship (Barnhurst, 2003), a clear understanding of present-day citizenship must be formed.

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how the practice of democratic citizenship compares to ideals of it. I hope to provide a clear view of what contemporary democratic citizenship means, how this conception has been formed, and how democratic citizenship can be effectively practiced to serve the ideals held by democratic citizens. To do this, this paper will be comprised in several parts. After an initial explanation of the theoretical perspective used, I will explore how democracy was understood and implemented in the formative stages of United States government. Next I review contemporary practices of citizenship before examining how presidential primary debates are a reflection of contemporary democracy. Finally, I talk with young people about their perceptions and performances of citizenship. In these conversations I hope to learn how the meaning of citizenship impacts their actions as democratic citizens.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Critical scholars are centrally concerned with comparing the intentions and ideals of a system against the reality of that system in order to improve it. Because the system under question is democratic citizenship, the question now becomes: what are the goals of democratic citizenship and are these goals being met? Because I take “government by the people” as the ultimate ideal of democratic citizenship the objective is to understand whether or not the people really do have the power of self-government. Now, another question arises: how do citizens collectively gather for government? This takes two processes: creating collective identities as citizens and acting collectively as citizens.

Citizenship is both an identity and an action. Both the identity as citizen and the action of citizenship rest on communication and impact the ability of citizenship to meet the ideal of self-government. Through communication we create the meaning of citizenship which then influences how we act as citizens. In the following section, I first describe how the identity of democratic citizen is created before examining how democratic citizenship can be collectively enacted.

### Civic Identity

As Jurgen Habermas (1984) discusses in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, collectively constructed lifeworlds guide our understandings of the objective world and ourselves. For Habermas, the lifeworld (or *Lebenswelt*) is a collective construction of reality based on individuals’ own understandings of the greater world. Individuals both form their impressions of the world against the backdrop of the collective lifeworld and contribute to its creation. Through communication, members of a community create a shared lifeworld, “bound by the totality of interpretations presupposed by the members as background knowledge” (Habermas, 1984, p. 13). “Presupposed” highlights the role of the collective lifeworld. Because

the lifeworld appears to the individual as reality, the common concepts that construct the lifeworld are presupposed to be natural.

In order to be understood, the speaker must conform to certain aspects of the lifeworld, like language or commonly defined concepts. Habermas (1984) contends that the rationality of arguments is based on their fit with the lifeworld. In attempting to relate one's meaning to another, individuals must rely on mutually constructed norms that reinforce the underlying lifeworld. "The meaning of objects for a person arises fundamentally out of the way they are defined to him by others with whom he interacts" (Blumer, 1986, p. 11).

Because of the reinforcing nature of conversing in lifeworlds, the meaning behind specific words becomes important. Languages are used to interpret the lifeworld. As Habermas (1984) states "for members of the same culture the limits of their language are the limits of the world" (p. 58). Personalized concepts of citizenship are thus created both privately, by the individual based on interpretations of the surrounding lifeworld, and collectively according to the norms of society.

The role of the collective definition of citizenship is evident. "Actions regulated by norms, expressive self-presentations, and also evaluative expressions, supplement constative speech acts in constituting a communicative practice which, against the background of a lifeworld, is oriented to achieving, sustaining, and renewing consensus" (Habermas, 1984, p. 17). In other words, norms reify norms. By continually participating in communication, members of a community engage in a public discourse in which norms are created. In short, by participating in communication that creates and reinforces the concept of citizenship, members of a society reinforce the norms of citizenship that have already been constructed.

For the individual, these lifeworlds contain "*identity-securing knowledge*" or core concepts on which individuals base their identities (Habermas, 1984). These core concepts are a



reflection of the society in which they live and often underscore their notions of society itself. Through communication based interaction, the individual comes to understand themselves in the terms defined by those they interact with, or others in their society (Blumer, 1986). The shared concept of democratic citizenship, then, also influences private notions of citizenship. The notion of self that one holds is a reflection of how that self has been communicatively defined by society (Blumer, 1986). How an individual personally views her role as citizen may reflect, in large part, how society has defined her role as citizen.

Definitions of citizenship not only shape how individuals self-identify as citizens, they also shape how they act as democratic citizens both independently and collectively. “Meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right. To ignore the meaning of the things toward which people act is seen as falsifying the behavior under study” (Blumer, 1986, p. 3) The functioning of a the citizenry in a democratic government, then, is product of the way that people interpret their role as democratic citizens.

Because we collectively create an understanding of citizenship that serves as a basis for our practice of citizenship and our identities as citizens, we must be careful to realistically assess what citizenship has come to mean, how that meaning has been created, and how this affects how the individual citizen acts in the real world.

### Deliberative Democracy

Gamson (2001) notes that there is:

a recurrent theme that, in democracy, public discourse can and should empower citizens, give them voice and agency, build community, and help citizens to act on behalf of their interests and values. The normative standard here is one of engaging citizens in the democratic process through their active participation in the public sphere. (p. 56)

Here, Gamson highlights the notion that democracy is dependent on a vibrant public sphere in which members of a community can help shape the actions of government through collective discourse. In short, true democracy stems from deliberative democracy. In order for the people to

collectively self govern, communication must serve to coordinate individuals into collective action. In this sense, communication itself is an action. As Carey (1981) recognizes, communication is “a form of action, action or better interaction, that not merely represents or describes but actually molds or constitutes the world” (p. 30).

Habermas (1984) specifies the role of deliberation in a democracy in his concept of the public sphere. For Habermas the public sphere is the realm in which citizens can discuss the affairs of the state with the aim of reaching consensus and guiding the actions of the government. Habermas argues that deliberation in the public sphere is a necessity for a true democracy in which the voices of the citizens can impact the actions of the government. The ideal public sphere then, is one in which individuals can engage in conversation that will guide the currents of democratic governance and political action.

Because the public sphere is an essential element of democracy, the way that individuals interact in that public sphere is important. As Vitale (2006) states, “To the extent that communicative reason is strengthened, democracy is improved” (p. 743). In Habermas’s ideal public sphere information flows freely, and through deliberation members of the public can eventually reach a rational consensus aimed at progressively improving society. If the people are to have the ability to self-govern, they must have the ability to successfully interact with one another with the goal of reaching consensus and improving society.

#### Communicative Action

For this to be possible, however, communicative action must take place, or communication meant to build understanding with the ultimate goal of consensus (Habermas, 1984). As defined by Habermas (1984) communicative action:

Refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extraverbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. (p. 86)

Communicative action occurs when individuals engage in rational communication in order to reach consensus and coordinate action. This type of communication occurs when the speaker's goal is to build understanding.

In communicative action, speakers make validity claims based on truth and normative values (Habermas, 1984). The dialectic partner (the person with whom the speaker is having the conversation), in turn, has the ability to question the validity claims made by the first speaker. In communicative action these questions are based on the dialectic partner's own validity claims, also based on truth and normative values. Because the ultimate goal of communicative action is consensus building, the dialectic partners must each interpret the meaning of the other and attempt to integrate the others validity claims into his own understanding. It is through this process that collective understandings, and ultimately consensus, are built.

Strategic action, however, threatens communicative action and thus the goal of the public sphere. Rather than an attempt to reach a reasoned consensus, strategic action is oriented toward influence and success (Habermas, 1984; Johnson, 1991; Niemi, 2005). In strategic action the goal is not consensus but coercion. By using coercive forces (threats, manipulation) strategic action undermines the ability of actors to take part in rational communication aimed at reaching consensus (Niemi, 2005). In this aspect, strategic communication is parasitic to communicative action (Habermas, 1984). By usurping the role of rational deliberation, strategic action impedes the ability of those participating in communication to reach a true understanding, and thus eventual consensus.

Although strategic action may be conducted overtly, such as the through the use of force or threats, often strategic action is covert. "One subject inconspicuously harnesses another for his own purposes, that is, induces him to behave in a desired way by manipulatively employing linguistic means and thereby instrumentalizes him for his own success" (Habermas, 1984, p.

288). It is this covert strategic action, through the use of manipulative language, that is the real threat in the modern public sphere. Through the use of distorted logic and linguistic skill, speakers can manipulate and persuade members of the public into action (such as voting for a particular candidate) that they may not have chosen to perform without the influence of the strategic communication. These statements do not represent true validity claims as they are not based in truth and normative values and do not open themselves to critique and question. Instead, rhetoric and ideology are often used to prop up claims made through strategic action. Ideology is an example of distorted communication resulting from “asymmetric communication” in which validity claims are not challenged (Bohman, 2000, 385). In this sense, ideology is strategic action because ideology is not open to critique.

It should be clear at this point that a clear concept of democratic citizenship and the presence of communicative action in the public sphere are necessary to the proper functioning of democracy. The collective definition of citizenship not only defines the role of the citizen; if democratic citizenship is to progress we must reach a consensus about our understanding of citizenship in order to effectively and collectively channel the actions of the citizen. Without a public sphere aimed at reaching consensus, democracy cannot truly exist. A weak public sphere hindered by strategic communication blurs not only the role for the citizen but the ability of the citizen to create effective change. Without citizen based communicative action citizens essentially lose their power in democratic government.

## Plan

In what follows I attempt to clarify the concept of citizenship, discover how that meaning has been created, and learn how that meaning impacts the role of the citizen in democratic governance.

The first part will be devoted to the understanding and implementation of democratic ideals in early American history. For this section I will perform a close reading of influential texts written and published during the founding of United States democracy in order to explore how the ideals and practices of democratic citizenship were understood and realized during this period. Next I will provide a portrait of contemporary American democracy based on studies of actors in the public sphere. Here I pay particular attention to the professionalization of the public sphere. Following this, I perform a close reading of six presidential primary debates from the 2008 primary season, looking specifically at how these debates reflect communicative action in the public sphere and define the role for the citizen. Finally, I talk with young students at Louisiana State University to explore how they understand democratic citizenship and the effect this has on their practice of citizenship. During these talks I explore these students' perceptions of citizenship, how they formed these perceptions, and how these perceptions impact their performance of citizenship.

## EARLY AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Our understanding of citizenship is a product of the history of democratic citizenship in the United States. “Because it is built up over time by the fitting together of acts, each joint action must be seen as having a career or a history. In having a career, its course and fate are contingent on what happens during its formation” (Blumer, 1986, p. 71). Hence, the concept of citizenship constructed historically through communication underscores the current understanding of citizenship. Revolutionary era notions of citizenship hold a place of particular importance as they guided the construction of the Constitution and laid down the norms for citizenship on which our current conception rests.

Here, I present a close reading of four influential texts written and published in the formative stages of American democracy: *On the Social Contract* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine, *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, and *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville. These four pieces provide insight into both the concepts of democratic citizenship during this period as well as the way citizenship was performed during this period. Scattered throughout these texts are understandings of citizenship that spurred the Revolution, guided the writers of the Constitution, and were implemented by early American citizens. An analysis of these texts will provide the groundwork for our understanding of contemporary democracy by unearthing the foundation on which our contemporary concept of citizenship is built.

Although the republican form of government promoted by *The Federalist Papers* and implemented through the Constitution created a delegate form of representation, a more idealistic version of democracy, espoused by Rousseau, leaves little room for this type of representation. Rousseau emphasizes the responsibility of the citizen that he argues is necessary to the proper functioning of a sovereign public. While a legitimate government was responsible to the will of

the public, responsibility also lay at the foot of the citizen. “As soon as someone says of the business of the state – ‘What does it matter to me?’ – then the state must be reckoned lost” (Rousseau, 1762/1968, p. 141). For Rousseau (1762/1968), every citizen has a duty to make up his own mind, “Sovereignty cannot be represented” (p. 141).

Rousseau rationalized a democratic revolution in 1762 with the publication of *The Social Contract*. Searching for freedom from monarchical governments, the citizens of the French and American Revolutions garnered strength from his claim that sovereignty belonged to the citizen. Disavowing government that acted against the general will, Rousseau argued that the citizens had the right to overthrow any government that usurped the power of the people.

As relations between the Americans and the British grew tense on the eve of the Revolutionary War, Thomas Paine, building on the concept of self rule espoused by Rousseau, wrote that natural equality gave the colonial citizens the authority to overthrow the confines of authoritarian rule. In his essay, *Common Sense*, Paine lashes out against the English monarchy, declaring that no man was born with the power to rule over his fellow citizens. “For all men being originally equals, no *one* by *birth* could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever,” (Paine, 1776/1976, p. 76). The fire ignited by Paine blazed through the colonies. A people once reluctant to usurp the power of the king quickly turned as Paine’s pamphlet spread through the public. Through Paine’s arguments, the colonial citizens began to feel the yoke of a distant ruler who oppressed the rightful sovereigns of the country, themselves. “The American Revolution broke out, and the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people came out of the townships, and took possession of the State. Every class was enlisted in its cause; battles were fought and victories obtained for it; it became the law of laws” (Tocqueville, 1835/1956, p. 56).

The public Tocqueville describes are active citizens, fully participating in the community that surrounds them and willingly giving of themselves for the cause of self-rule. Equality and freedom are the cornerstones of democracy here. Though Tocqueville's writings appeared almost a century after the Revolution, his work provides insight into the daily lives of early American citizens. Tocqueville describes an almost anarchistic local government in which the people tend to public matters without the interference of the central government. Here, democracy, as defined by Rousseau, may truly have existed, with the public literally governing themselves through private, non-governmental societies. "In the New England town, the law of representation was not adopted; but the affairs of the community were discussed, as at Athens, in the market-place, by a general assembly of citizens," (Tocqueville, 1835/1956, p. 46). Instead of relying on the government to provide for them, citizens sprang to action without the guidance or even the input of elected officials (Tocqueville, 1835/1956). Tocqueville provides numerous examples of citizens voluntarily banding together to correct problems in their society. If a road needed to be fixed or a school set up for the education of the public, individual members of society organized themselves to collect the money and oversee the project.

To Tocqueville, this freedom came with responsibility. "It was never assumed in the United States, that the citizen of a free country has a right to do whatever he pleases; on the contrary, more social obligations were there imposed on him than anywhere else," (Tocqueville, 1835/1956 p. 62). Equality meant an equal share in both the rights and responsibilities of government. Recognizing that each person relied on others in the community, individuals would work for the benefits of all in order to guarantee rights and freedoms for themselves. Liberty during this period appears to have truly meant self-sovereignty, as citizens were directly responsible for the order and provisions of their local communities.



Tocqueville asserts that the town was the center of early American life, and by keeping its independence from the national government, democracy could flourish in local communities. “In America...the township was organized before the county, the county before the State, the State before the Union” (Tocqueville, 1835/1956, p. 46). It was in the town that citizens had true sovereignty. This notion appeared in *The Federalist Papers* as well:

In the compound republic of America, the power surrendered by the people is first divided between two distinct governments, and then the portion allotted to each subdivided among distinct and separate departments. Hence a double security arises to the rights of the people. The different governments will control each other, at the same time that each will be controlled by itself. (Hamilton, Madison & Jay, 1788/1999 p. 291)

Madison states that local governments are an essential right of the public and a check on centralized powers. Without this check, the sovereignty of the public could be in doubt.

But, not all of the founding fathers appeared to place such trust in the ability of the American public to wisely self-govern. Elsewhere in *The Federalist Papers*, the authors call for a more centralized government that removes the citizens from direct power. The writers of *The Federalist Papers* used the pull for freedom to convince the American public to ratify the new United States Constitution, but did not always grant the public sovereignty as understood by Rousseau. “The fabric of American empire ought to rest on the solid basis of THE CONSENT OF THE PEOPLE. The stream of national power ought to flow immediately from that pure, original fountain of all legitimate authority,” (Hamilton, Madison & Jay, 1788/1961 p. 120). Here, two points are noteworthy. First, Hamilton requests the “consent of the people.” While wanting their approval, Hamilton does not necessarily argue for their input. Freedom in this case meant the right to approve of or disapprove of the government’s actions, not to guide them. To these authors, liberty meant freedom from monarchical control, not direct democracy. The second line tends to hide this notion, though, claiming that the public is the legitimate source of authority. Hamilton appears to be paying lip-service to the public by granting them the authority

to consent without the power to direct the actual course of government. This task was left to the representatives.

While exclaiming the equal rights of all American citizens, the writers of *The Federalist Papers* actually argue for a limited republic to save the government from the “tyranny of the majority.” Madison states that a republican form of government is the best means of saving the people from themselves. The effect of a republic, he claims, is “to refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations,” (Hamilton, Madison & Jay, 1788/1961, p. 50). The authors of *The Federalist Papers* contest that although the public would not willingly act against their own interests, they could be easily swayed by passions and forgo their reasoning when making decisions.

Though they held the legitimate authority, the people were to entrust their sovereignty into the hands of the elected elites who were wiser and more capable of handling the affairs of government. Hamilton reiterates this point when arguing that the Constitution must be ratified by the people in order to hold legitimate authority over the public:

The republican principle demands that the deliberative sense of the community should govern the conduct of those to whom they intrust [sic] the management of their affairs; but it does not require an unqualified complaisance to every sudden breeze of passion, or to every transient impulse which the people may receive from the arts of men, who flatter their prejudices to betray their interests, (Hamilton, Madison & Jay, 1788/1961 p. 400).

While granting the people the liberty to choose their leaders, Hamilton still states that it is in the public’s best interest to have others make governmental decisions for them. The fear of public opinion is evident in this quote. Complying with the whims of the public is not good government according to Hamilton. The citizens’ responsibility was to elect the officials, not guide them in the policy process.

In a representative form of democracy, the political power of the citizen lives in the vote. Suffrage provides sovereignty. In Federalist No. 10 Madison states that it is the republican form of government that will allow the people of the United States to maintain sovereignty. The largeness of the nation not only mandated this form but served to enable it. Because, according to Madison, a limited number of representatives is necessary to contain debate and maintain order, each community would vote for their best citizens to make their political decisions for them. Citizens could entrust their government to the wisest men from their local community, freeing themselves of the specialized knowledge needed to make policy decisions. Although the right to vote was limited, and the voting process amounted to little more than an affirmation of social hierarchy (Schudson, 1998), voting lay at the center of self-sovereignty in the republican form of government heralded by *The Federalist Papers*. As Madison notes in Federalist No. 57, “The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society” (Hamilton, Madison & Jay, 1787/1961, p. 318). He continues, “The elective mode of obtaining rulers is the characteristic policy of republican government” (pp. 318-319). This is the notion of citizenship our Constitution was built on and which continues to effectively govern the nation today.

Far from the direct democracy espoused by Rousseau and idealized through myths of the Greek city-states (Dahl, 1991) and representations of early American government (Tocqueville, 1835/1956), the Constitution set in place a republican system of government that relied more on the citizens’ vote than their direct participation in the political process. Though ideals of equality and self-sovereignty may have spurred the Revolutionary War and the formation of the United States government, a republican form of government was realized through the Constitution. It is this representative form, which grants the citizen limited power over the political process, and not the ideal espoused by Rousseau, that survives today.

Still, Rousseau's ideals of democracy may live on in the minds of many Americans. And the confusion between that ideal and the representative form may be the cause for much of the civic disengagement that occurs. Aside from a general detachment that may arise from misunderstanding one's role in the government, citizens wanting power over their government may become discouraged when little opportunity arises to exercise effective power.

## CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY

The debate between participatory democracy and representative democracy has not subsided. Though our current form of government is largely based upon the original representative form instituted through the Constitution, supporters of a more hands-on democracy continue to push for more civic engagement. Particularly in an era when voting levels in the United States rarely reach above 50 percent, even those who press for representative forms of government lament the lack of awareness and engagement in the process of choosing elected officials.

Rather than granting citizens the means to effectively influence government, many of the traditional avenues, such as the expression of public opinion, have been taken over by professionals, leaving the average citizen little room to contribute to the political process (Herbst, 1993; Ginsberg, 1989). The power of the citizen that could once be at least somewhat realized through organizations and public opinion has been largely usurped by an increasingly professionalized class of political elites. Attempts to expand democracy, it seems, are often hampered by the limitations of a representative form of government designed to give more power to the voice of the elites.

In this section I review the research literature on contemporary civic involvement in the public sphere. Three sets of actors in the public sphere are analyzed: average citizens, the media, and political professionals. In each case I attempt to explain how these actors are currently performing their roles in the public sphere and how effective they are in shaping democratic governance in the United States.

### Citizens

American citizens play a limited role in the public sphere. Though some researchers, attempting to cast a positive light on the ability of the citizenry, find rays of hope in indications

of increased volunteering or growing Internet communities, these alternate avenues for civic involvement cannot replace the traditional forms of political participation, such as voting and party membership, that are on the decline in the United States.

Though at times, such as during the partisan era of the 1800s and the Civil Rights movement, the means for citizens to effectively participate in the public sphere existed, today, the majority of citizens rarely engage in political activity (Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Schudson, 1998; Zukin et al., 2006). Today's citizens are not actively involved in politics, evidenced by decreasing partisan identification, low levels of political awareness, a retreat from traditional social organizations, and low levels of voter turnout (Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Zaller, 1992; Zukin et al., 2006).

Patterson (2003) contends that, "Ordinary citizens have been buffeted by developments they do not control and only vaguely comprehend, and which have diminished their stake, interest, and confidence in elections" (p. 22). Surveys conducted by Zukin et al (2003), indicate that less than half of the citizenry regularly concerns themselves with political affairs. Only 45 percent of all respondents claimed they paid attention to government and public affairs "most of the time" (Zukin et al, 2003, p. 62). This number drops even lower for the youngest generation, with only 25 percent paying attention "most of the time" (Zukin et al, 2003, p. 82).

All of these signs point to a public detached from the public sphere. When citizens fail to join social organizations or vote in elections they limit their ability to be heard, to engage in the debate over self-government that is supposed to occur in the public sphere. But even when citizens do organize, their discussion of public matters is limited. In her study of social organizations, Nina Eliasoph (1996) finds that the more public the avenue for the expression of opinion the less public the communication. An example here will illustrate. While a group of environmental activists would often privately talk about the wider social implications of the

disposal of toxic waste in their neighborhood, when provided with a public forum the activists would revert to personalized understandings of the impact of the toxins on their children and property values (Eliasoph, 1996, p. 273).

Eliasoph (1996) believes that this is due in part to the ways that gatekeepers in the public sphere create openings for the expression of public opinion. She finds that reporters would only listen to the activists when their speech was rooted in the personal, not allowing them to speak toward broader problems or public opinion. In less socially conscious organizations the same effect occurred. When people gathered together they often essentially avoided political conversation (Eliasoph, 1996).

Low levels of external political efficacy may deter many citizens from choosing to participate in the political process (Patterson, 2002). In short, average citizens hold little stock in the idea that the government is responsive to what the public wants (Zukin et al, 2006). The lack of feelings of efficacy is a problem for advocates of participatory democracy. Those with high levels of political efficacy are more likely to value the ideals of participatory democracy and low levels have been shown to produce a decline in voter turnout (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982). Patterson (2002) calls these citizens disenchanteds. As he finds, “Politics itself is not their gripe. It is the practice of politics to which they object, and it discourages some of them from voting,” (Patterson, 2002, p. 84). Patterson states that these citizens aren’t necessarily unaware, just sick of the negativity and manipulation that appears to pervade modern day politics; in short, they are disgusted (Patterson, 2002, p. 85).

## The Media

Today, the media holds an institutionalized role in the political process (Cook, 2005). It not only serves as a place of communication between elected officials and citizens, it also serves as an arena in which public officials can speak to one another (Cook, 2005). Because of its role

in public communication, the media holds a critical place in the public sphere. The negative tone of the media, however, and its coverage of soft news over hard news interfere with the role of communication in the public sphere.

Public disgust may arise, in part, from the negative tone of the modern media (Patterson, 2002). Thriving on conflict, the news media now play an adversarial role to the government. During the electoral process, the media repeatedly criticize candidates, redefining the campaign rhetoric from policy issues addressed by the candidates to attacks hurled by the media (Patterson, 2002). By repeatedly attacking the candidates, the media implies that they cannot be trusted, when in fact, according to four major studies, modern presidents do try to fulfill almost all of their campaign promises and are often successful (as cited in Patterson, 2002, p. 54).

Another trend that may be leading citizens away from politics is the replacement of hard news with soft news. In an attempt to drive up ratings, news outlets increasingly focus on public interest and entertainment over public policy and political affairs (Patterson, 2002). The infiltration of soft news is evident in citizens' familiarity with news stories. In a report conducted by the Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy (2007), researchers find that while about 75 percent of respondents were familiar with contemporary soft news stories, only about 45 percent recognized their hard news counterparts (p. 16).

Even when the news media do discuss political affairs, the focus rarely appears to be on the issues. In the 2000 presidential campaign more than 50 percent of candidate gaffes (such as tripping or misspeaking) received extended news coverage<sup>1</sup>, while only 15 percent of policy stories received similar treatment (Patterson, 2002). As Paul Weaver suggests, soft news may be so far disconnected from our civic life that it gives citizens little reason to become involved with

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<sup>1</sup> Extended news coverage is defined by Patterson to mean coverage of an event that lasts for two or more days.



politics (as cited in Patterson, 2003, p. 89). In other words, because soft news focuses on trivial affairs, citizens see no need to pay attention to it.

Finally, the media gives more voice to politicians than to citizens. Robert Entman (2003) illustrates this through his cascading activation model. In his model, he shows how the executive branch and the political elites set the political agenda and largely decide the terms of debate in the public sphere. According to Entman, opinions are generally formed at the administrative and elite level and slowly trickle down to the public. Although the media, lower level elites, and the public can alter and act on the original opinion, most real debate is still carried on by the highest level elites, not the general public. He goes on to argue that only when political elites openly disagree does dissent actually become part of the political conversation. Only when elites compete against other elites does legitimate and effective debate occur in the public sphere.

#### Political Professionals

Partially propped up by the media, political professionals now hold an inordinate amount of sway over the public sphere. As Converse (1964) notes, “a small fraction of the electorate claims a large fraction of the total political information accessible in memory to anyone” (p. 334). Political professionals garner knowledge of the political process and the formation of political opinions and accumulate resources such as large amounts of money and greater access to political elites. This allows them to manipulate public opinion, and thus the political process, in ways that the average, poorly financed and unorganized citizen cannot (Fiorina et al., 2006; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Ginsberg, 1989).

The professionalization of community organizations serves as an example of the professionalization of the public sphere. Skocpol (2002) draws on the work of Tocqueville, noting that traditional American organizations were rooted in the local community. Relying on a federated coalition of local organizations, traditional organizations gave individual citizens the

opportunity to voice their opinions and actively participate in the functions of the organization (Skocpol, 2002). Through these organizations, individual citizens with strong opinions and little personal resources could actively participate in politics (Ginsberg, 1989). These types of organizations, however, are dying out (Putnam, 2002; Skocpol, 2002). Today, traditional forms of organization have been replaced by interest groups who often have no members at all (Ginsberg, 1989; Putnam, 2002; Skocpol, 2002). Instead, membership is often limited to placement on a mailing list in return for financial contributions (Skocpol, 2002; Wuthnow, 2002). This significantly impedes the ability of individuals to influence the agenda of the organization of which they are a member. While organizations had once been an avenue for the expression of public opinion (Ginsberg, 1989), the public in the opinion expressed by these organizations is becoming increasingly limited.

The party system is a particularly important example of this. Parties were once an avenue through which citizens could take active part in politics. If they could not actually influence the party platforms, citizens were at least being socialized in politics and identified themselves through their participation in the political process (Schudson, 1998). Today, party identification and the ability to differentiate between the parties has decreased while ticket splitting, the number of registered independents, and negative feelings toward the parties themselves have increased (Fiorina et al, 2006; Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000). In addition to the loss of social ties (Putnam, 2000) and political participation (Schudson, 1998) that appear to accompany the decline in partisanship, a lack of partisan attachment appears to decrease voter turnout (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Fiorina et al, 2006). With the decline of parties, the public lost an avenue through which large numbers of citizens learned about and became active participants in politics.

Here, a discussion of the measurement of public opinion becomes necessary. Before the advent of scientific polling (emanating from the Progressive era), public opinion tended to be measured by active participation in social movements and the public expression of passionate opinions (Ginsberg, 1989). Aggregate measures of public opinion were only available during elections, and these measures could be seen as little more than approval or disapproval of currently elected officials (Herbst, 1993). During this period, in order to voice one's public opinion, one had to be an active advocate. Either by joining a club or writing a letter, citizens had to be proactive to voice their opinion (Ginsberg, 1989). People who express their opinion in this way tend to have more thought out and strongly held opinions (Zaller, 1992).

The birth of modern polling techniques, however, dramatically changed the concept of public opinion and the means of its expression. As Benjamin Ginsberg (1989) states, "Over the past several decades, polling has generally come to be seen as the most accurate and reliable means of gauging the public's sentiments" (p. 273). Heralded by one of its earliest advocates, George Gallup, as a means of truly democratizing the nation, polling was meant to be a substitute for the assemblies of the Greek city-states (Asher, 2007). Although the distance and number of the United States was great, polling would allow for individuals to express their opinions on all matters of government (Lewis, 2001). Polling expanded the opportunity for large numbers of the public to voice their opinions by offering more opportunities to assess the public's attitude about more subjects than could be gathered through periodic elections (Asher, 2007).

This move, however, created a shift in the expression of public opinion. Where opinion had once been formulated by individuals holding passionate opinions in a bottom-up fashion, opinion was now measured from the top-down (Ginsberg, 1989; Herbst, 1993; Lewis, 2001). As Herbst (1993) states, "polls constrain people in a way riots do not" (p. 62), or put in another way "polling renders public opinion less dangerous, less disruptive, more permissive and, in some

instances more amenable to governmental control” (Ginsberg, 1989, p. 275). In polling, political elites present members of the public with pre-formed questions. The issue is brought to the public and defined by political elites, rather than members of the public bringing matters of concern to the elites (Ginsberg, 1989; Lewis, 2001). This creates two essential problems: passionate opinions can be washed out in the vague sentiments of the larger public, and members of the public are at a disadvantage in controlling the content of public opinion (Ginsberg, 1989; Herbst, 1993). Because polling derives from the elites, elites are able to decide which issues to bring to public debate, i.e. which issues are important (Herbst, 1993). In addition, while public opinion once emanated from the highly aware and passionate, now those with little actual opinion are measured equally with those who feel passionately about an issue (Ginsberg, 1989; Zaller, 1992). This may actually serve to delegitimize political organizations and those with intensely held and thought out opinions as Lewis (2001) recognizes, stating “The notion of public opinion has been used to delegitimize assembly by large groups of citizens in pursuit of a cause,” (p. 26). By comparing these more extreme (and knowledgeable) opinions against the more complacent and uniformed opinions of the general public, activists appear radical and separated from the general public.

Political elites are aware of the ambiguity of poll response (Ginsberg, 1989; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). Instead of giving citizens greater control over policy decisions, polls are often used to manipulate the public into acceptance of an elite formed opinion (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). Ginsberg (1989) notes:

Rather than offer governments the opinions that citizens want them to learn, the polls tell governments – or their sponsors – what they would like to learn about citizens’ opinion. The end result is to change the public expression of opinion from an ascertain of demand to a step in the process of persuasion (p. 288).

By discovering how subtle changes in question wording change polling responses, political professionals can determine how to best package messages for public acceptance (Jacobs &

Shapiro, 2000). Now strategic communication, “the scientific engineering and targeting of messages that subordinate the ideals of deliberation and transparency to the achievement of narrow political goals” (Bennett & Manheim, 2001, p. 282) threatens to seriously undermine the ability of citizens to apply rationalization to questions of public affairs. If in reality polls are more often used to manipulate public opinion than to guide the decisions of elected officials, the enterprise of polling seems to have been largely usurped by the political elites.

This manipulation of the public is not new. It stems from representative understandings of democracy that remove the public from governmental decisions, instead allowing a representative elite to guide the actions of the government. As citizens were removed from the governing process, their ability to self-govern came in doubt. It is this concern with the public’s ability to knowledgably self-govern that lead Progressive reformers to implement reforms intended to protect the general public from the power of political manipulation (Schudson, 1998). As Delli Carpini & Williams (2001) point out, the work of Walter Lippmann (1925) provides evidence that “the public was increasingly seen as an inchoate, disengaged mass that was susceptible to manipulation by the media and that required protection from the media’s propagandizing power” (p. 164). Instead of creating greater avenues for citizens to influence policy, however, these reforms actually served to instill a class of political experts who perform the role the citizen is not trusted to perform herself (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001).

## DEBATES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Next, I turn to an analysis of presidential primary debates. This analysis serves two purposes: it serves as an example of contemporary communication in the public sphere and it provides evidence of the formation of the concept of citizenship in the public sphere.

Candidate debates serve a crucial purpose in a representative system of democracy. If citizens are to choose between candidates they must have an understanding of what each candidate aims to accomplish and how they differ from their competitors. The presidential primary debates are particularly important for representative governance in the United States. These debates serve as a tool for choosing candidates for the November presidential election and, as such, shape the platform of the party for the presidential race.

The debates, however, do not always live up to the purpose of providing information for voters. Instead, manipulation and rhetoric often crowd out the room for meaningful discussion as strategic action encroaches on communicative action. When candidates fail to engage in communicative action they deprive the voting public of the information necessary to make informed decisions, and debates fail to fulfill their purpose. Aiming to explore both how the structure of debates encourages or discourages communicative action, as well as how candidates themselves employ these types of communication, I perform a close reading of six presidential primary debates from the 2008 primary season.

### Literature Review

If debates are to serve their purpose in the public sphere, strategic action cannot overpower the cause of communicative action. These debates serve to give citizens information about candidates for the presidency. They are a fundamental step in a representative system which evolves around elected officials. If the purpose of the debates is to allow citizens to understand the goals and plans of prospective elected officials, the appearance of manipulative

speech can only inhibit the citizenry's ability to reach a knowledgeable decision on how to cast their vote.

The goal of the debates, then, is communicative action aimed at providing citizens with information about the candidates. Information plays an important role in the citizens' ability to choose between primary nominees. In the primary season the debates are used to winnow down the nominations for the respective parties. Because candidates are attempting to represent the same party platform, they often only have minor issue differences. "Given the fact that political party affiliation is of little or no help in deciding which candidate to support, and that voters know less about the candidates in the primary, campaign messages like primary debates have the potential to contribute substantially to democracy" (Benoit, McKinney & Stephenson, 2002, p. 329).

In fact, watching primary debates can affect an individual's character evaluations of candidates, increase his knowledge of candidates' policy stances, and affect his vote choice (Benoit, McKinney & Stephenson, 2002). In addition, after watching post-primary presidential debates young citizens had increased levels of efficacy and decreased levels of cynicism (McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007). Not only do debates provide citizens with information that affects their decisions, they can also increase a citizen's confidence in his ability to enact change.

By providing information and affecting the way in which citizens participate in government, debates hold a critical place in the public sphere. Because the debates are so powerful, the manner in which they are conducted matters. If strategic action overshadows communicative action, debates may fail in their purpose, and citizens are deprived of their ability to reach agreement through consensus.

The structure of the debates, however, and the candidates' behavior in the debates affect the amount of communicative action emanating from them. As Bilmes (1999) notes, debates

differ markedly from everyday conversation. They are circumscribed by rules and confined by time limits. In fact, because of their very nature and intention, debates are often structured as a means of strategic action. The goal of campaign debates is not to reach consensus with fellow candidates, but rather to gain the support of viewers in order to win the election. “A political campaign debate is different from an argument in that the objective is not to convince one’s interlocutor but to convince the audience and thereby win votes” (Bilmes, 1999, 216).

Even so, debates can still serve the purpose of communicative action by providing citizens with the information necessary to capably perform their duty as members of the voting public. And the structure of the debate fundamentally impacts the information produced by it (Bilmes, 1999, Carlin, Morris, & Smith, 2001). While conversational debates (such as town-hall meetings) encourage candidates to discuss the underlying rationality of policy proposals and engage in self reflection, moderator driven debates tend to produce a more combative style of discussion, drawing contrasts between candidates (Carlin, Morris, & Smith, 2001).

The use of questions by both moderators (or panelists or audience members) as well as candidates is one way in which the format of a debate impacts the ensuing discussion (Bilmes, 1999; Carlin, Morris, & Smith, 2001; Marshall, 2001). Asking pointed questions encourages candidates to reply with specific answers (Bilmes, 1999; Marshall, 2001), and a moderator may use follow-up questions to encourage candidates to stay on topic (Bilmes, 1999). If moderators fail to perform these tasks, however, candidates have the ability to evade difficult questions. In his brief critique of the 2000 presidential debates Marshall (2001) argues that due to the lack of pointed questions by moderator Jim Lehrer, candidates were not held accountable for sidestepping questions, and viewers were prevented from gaining insight into candidates’ stances on certain issues.



Candidates, however, can overcome a deficiency in moderator questioning by introducing questions of their own. “Questions are powerful resources for a debater. Through the use of questions, Speaker A can force Speaker B to address A’s topic” (Bilme, 1999, 228). By asking their own questions, candidates can attempt to define the topic of debate and draw out specific information from their competitors. This practice, though, is often hampered by the structure of the debate, which v often offer little opportunity for candidates to interact and thus challenge each other through questions. Either by limiting the time allotted for free discussion amongst the candidates or by outright forbidding candidates to question each other (as was stipulated by the rules in the 2000 presidential debates), the format of debates can serve to limit the use of questions as a tool for building information and engaging in communicative action.

## Method

In order to explore the use of communicative and strategic action in presidential primary debates, I examine three Republican and three Democrat debates held during the 2008 primary season. For each party I examine the first debate held as well as the debates that received the highest ratings. Finally I examine the last debate among Republican candidates and one of the later debates held among the Democratic candidates. (For details on each debate see Appendix A). Because the Democratic nomination is still undecided as I write, I have chosen to study the debate which took place at the end of February. While this is certainly not the last debate held between the Democratic nominees it was the latest date acceptable for analysis. Transcripts of each debate were retrieved from popular news Websites and examined for examples of communicative and strategic action.

Interaction in these debates takes place on two levels: between the candidates and the audience and among the candidates. In each debate, I attempt to understand how the candidates provide information to the public and how they interact with one another. Ultimately I seek to

explore whether or not they provided citizens with the information to rationally choose between the candidates for the presidential nomination, but also I hope to understand how their interaction serves or inhibits the cause of communicative action.

Because the difference between communicative and strategic action is partially defined by the intention of the speaker, a third party analysis of their use proves difficult. Kihlstrom and Isreal (2002), however, provide some guidelines for recognizing the appearance of communicative and strategic action in their study of the effects of different types of communication on feelings of competence. Like Habermas (1984), they note that communicative action is rooted in validity claims based in truth and normative values. In communicative action dialectic partners have the ability to accept or reject these validity claims based on their own similarly constructed validity claims. Though viewers do not have the ability to interact with the debaters, communicative action can be found through the use of rationalized validity claims by candidates and candidate interaction. In addition, the appearance of questions can also indicate the use of communicative action. Questions can serve the purpose of communicative action by serving as a critique of validity claims. In short, rationally based validity claims, attempts at providing understanding, attempts to reach consensus with other candidates, and the appearance of questions can all be signs of communicative action.

Strategic action, in contrast, is not aimed at consensus and understanding. If consensus does occur, it is exemplified through false consensus, or consensus that is off topic or coincidental (Kihlstrom & Isreal, 2002). In strategic action validity claims are based on truth and normative values only to the extent that they fulfill the aim of the speaker. In addition, rather than exploring the validity claims made by dialectic partners, alternative validity claims are blocked and mutual authority is denied (Kihlstrom & Isreal, 2002). In other words, candidates use strategic action by rejecting the claims made by other candidates rather than exploring and

integrating these claims into the conversation. In denying alternative validity claims, candidates deny their competitors authority on the issue at hand. In these debates, strategic action will be evidenced by false or off-topic consensus, the presentation of information without the presence of rationally based validity claims, and the outright rejection of alternative validity claims. In addition, the use of ideology will indicate strategic action as it is often used to back statements where rationalized validity claims are absent.

Finally, because these debates hold such a prominent place in the public sphere, I explore how the candidates defined the role of the citizen in the democratic process. As the conversations conducted in the public sphere affect our collective and individual identities, the way citizenship is defined in these debates may impact how citizens understand and act in their role as citizen. To do this, I looked for examples from the debates in which candidates either spoke directly to citizens or discussed the citizens' proper role in the government.

#### Debate Analysis

Thankfully, some communicative action certainly appears in these debates. Candidates vying for their party's nomination are eager to make validity claims, laying out specific policy proposals and pointing out the differences between themselves and other candidates. This appears to be particularly true for the primaries. Because the candidates issue stances are based in the same party platform, often the minor details are the only substantial differences between policy proposals.

Candidates from both parties talked extensively about their healthcare plans and their plans for the War in Iraq among other policy issues. Though their positions are often very similar, the candidates are careful to explain the rationale for their stances by using statistics (truth/facts) and explaining the underlying justifications (normative values). In addition, because the candidates often do hold similar policy proposals in primary debates, candidates were willing

to reach consensus with their opponents. In the following excerpt Barack Obama discusses the similarities and the differences between his and Hillary Clinton's healthcare plans:

OBAMA: ...We both -- 95 percent of our plans are similar. We both want to set up a system in which any person is going to be able to get coverage that is as good as we have as members of Congress. And we are going to subsidize those who can't afford it.

We're going to make sure that we reduce costs by emphasizing prevention. And I want to make sure that we're applying technology to improve quality, cut bureaucracy. Now, I also want to make sure that we're reducing costs for those who already have health insurance. So we put in place a catastrophic reinsurance plan that would reduce costs by \$2,500 per family per year.

So we've got a lot of similarities in our plan. We've got a philosophical difference, which we've debated repeatedly, and that is that Senator Clinton believes the only way to achieve universal health care is to force everybody to purchase it.

And my belief is, the reason that people don't have it is not because they don't want it but because they can't afford it. And so I emphasize reducing costs. (CNN.com, 2008a)

Here, Obama takes part in communicative action in that he realistically assesses both the similarities and differences between his plan and Clinton's in order to allow voters to choose between the two. While recognizing that their plans are very similar (a sign of consensus), Obama lays out specific policy proposals that differ. In addition, he provides an explanation for the difference between the plans by explaining the underlying argument between them. He recognizes Clinton's validity claims and attempts to integrate Clinton's validity claim into his own statement. In doing these things, Obama helps to bring clarity to the differences between himself and Clinton. This is essential if voters are to make a knowledgeable choice when deciding between him and Clinton at the voting booth.

Unfortunately, even in this example of communicative action, the infiltration of strategic action is evident. When describing their "philosophical difference" Obama uses strategic communication by saying Clinton will "force everybody to purchase it." Although he recognizes that Clinton's validity claim, rather than fully acknowledge the logic behind a mandate for all

Americans to purchase healthcare, he rejects it through the use of rhetoric, thus limiting the ability of the citizens to truly understand the underlying difference between the two.

This example underscores a common pattern found throughout these debates. Even when communicative action is present, it is often inhibited by the appearance of strategic communication. When this occurs, rather than building understanding the candidate in fact prevents it. And often, the communication is wholly strategic. With the ultimate goal of winning the nomination, candidates are often more eager to beat their opponent than to build understanding. In the following examples I discuss a variety of ways in which communicative action and strategic action are utilized in these debates. And though instances of communicative action are heartening, the prevalence of strategic action points toward a system in which citizens are hindered from receiving the information they need to act.

### Communicative Action

One of the most basic and prevalent examples of communicative action found in the debates was the presence of rational validity claims. Through these, candidates attempt to provide clarity so that the voters can reach an understanding of the candidate's plans of action. This is a necessary function of communicative action. In order for efficient communication to occur the receiver of the communication must be able to understand the meaning intended by the speaker. Here, Tommy Thompson discusses his plan for Iraq:

Thompson: ... Number one, I believe the al-Maliki government should be required to vote as to whether or not they want America in their country. If they vote yes, it gives us a legitimacy for being there. If they vote no, we should get out.

Secondly, there are 18 territories in Iraq, just like we have 50 states in America. I would require those territories to elect governments, just like we do in our states. And if you do so, the Shiites will elect Shiites. Sunnis will elect Sunnis. Kurds will elect Kurds. And you won't have this internecine civil war.

Third, I would split the oil reserves: one-third to the federal government, one-third to the state governments and one-third to every man, woman and child. If every man, woman and child is getting part of the oil proceeds, they're going to have a vested interest in their

country. They will be purchasing goods. They will be investing in small businesses. And they will be building the country on democratic grounds in Iraq. (MSNBC.com, 2007a)

In this passage, Thompson clearly lays out his plan for proceeding with the war in Iraq, his rationale behind that plan, and the anticipated results of the plan. Thompson clarifies his issue position and gives voters insight into his understanding of the plan as well. This serves two purposes in communicative action: it allows the audience to understand what is being communicated, and it allows the audience to understand how the speaker understands what he is communicating.

Another way that candidates engaged in communicative action was by posing questions. Sometimes these questions were directly related to another candidate's issue position, while at other times candidates themselves posed rhetorical questions meant to give perspective to the issue in question. When used effectively, questions can clarify the issue at hand and point towards avenues that need to be discussed in order to reach consensus. In the following excerpt Mike Gravel questions the effectiveness of Congress's passage of a resolution that called on President Bush to end the War in Iraq:

Gravel: ...So we passed -- and the media's in a frenzy right today with what has been passed. What has been passed? George Bush communicated over a year ago that he would not get out of Iraq until he left office. Do we not believe him?

We need to find another way. I really would like to sit down with Pelosi and with Reid, and I would hope the other senators would focus on, how do you get out? You pass the law, not a resolution, a law making it a felony to stay there. And I'll give you the text of it... (MSNBC.com, 2007b)

In this excerpt Gravel questions the legitimacy of a resolution which Congress knows will have little effect in ending the war. He correctly asserts that President Bush has already said he does not plan to end the war and that Congress knew that the resolution would be vetoed (truth). By questioning this action he critiques a validity claim made by another candidate (in this instance Clinton) that Congress had done everything in its power to end the War in Iraq. Here Gravel

engages in communicative action with his fellow candidates, by critiquing their validity claims, and with the viewers, by making validity claims of his own aimed at producing understanding.

### Strategic Action

One of the most discouraging themes that emerged from the debates was the lack of cooperation candidates received when they attempted to use communicative action to build greater understanding. Often when a candidate did make a sincere attempt at communicative action, they were thwarted by either their fellow candidates or the moderator. In this excerpt Mitt Romney attempts to address a question about his healthcare policy posed by fellow candidate Fred Thompson:

Romney: And the question is this, again: If someone can afford a policy and they choose not to buy it, should they be responsible for paying for their own care, or should they be able to go to the hospital and say, you know what, I'm not insured, you ought to pay for it? What we found was one quarter of the uninsured in my state were making \$75,000 a year or more, and my view is they should either buy insurance or they should pay their own way with a health savings account or some other savings account.

Moderator: We have an expression in television: we get into the weeds. We're in the weeds now on this. (Laughter.) (NYTimes.com, 2008a)

While Thompson and Romney are engaged in communicative action, the moderator claims that their conversation is too detailed, saying “we’re in the weeds”. Here, Thompson has questioned Romney’s proposal and Romney attempts to respond to Thompson and clarify his position. This is communicative action, an attempt between two people at reaching mutual understanding with the intention of acting on that consensus of understanding. The moderator, Charles Gibson, however, interferes with this communicative action, claiming that television is not the proper format for this type of discussion. Here Gibson implies that the candidates should not engage in this sort of communicative action during the debate, contradicting the purpose of deliberation in the public sphere. In this example, both the format of the debate and the moderator’s actions impede communicative action by preventing the candidates from extended interaction.

Candidates also interfered with communicative action, often by distorting the meaning of something their fellow candidate had previously said. Sometimes candidates were accused of changing positions based on the way they had worded policy opinions in the past in comparison with their current policy proposals. At other times, candidates' records would be called into question, often with a distortion of facts (truths). In this example John McCain questions Romney's record as governor of Massachusetts:

MCCAIN: ... And I heard Governor Romney describe his record. As I understand it, his record was that he raised taxes by \$730 million. He called them "fees." I'm sure the people that had to pay it, whether they called them bananas, they still had to pay \$730 million extra.

His job creation was the third worst in the country, as far as people of Massachusetts with a \$245 million debt because of the big government-mandated health care system. And while the rest of the country was losing 7 percent of the manufacturing jobs while he was governor, 14 percent of the manufacturing jobs left the state of Massachusetts. (CNN.com, 2008b)

In this case, McCain exaggerates the reality of the results of policy enacted while Romney was in office and distorts the truth. A look at Romney's response will provide some clarity:

ROMNEY: When you say that our state ranked number three in job creation, the study you're relying upon is a study that included her [former Governor Swift's] term in office. And during her term in office, 141,000 jobs were lost. During my term in office, we added jobs. And from the lowest point we added 60,000 new jobs. So that study, unfortunately, included the wrong data.

With regards to fees, we raised fees \$240 million. Not \$730 million. Facts are stubborn things. We audited our fee increase, because, of course, we cared...

...They're And by the way, no debt was left. I left a rainy day fund of over \$2 billion. Facts are stubborn things. I'm proud of my record. (CNN.com, 2008b)

Here McCain uses distorted information to make his case, thus failing to provide rationalized, and in this case truth-based, validity claims. This interferes with the cause of communicative action by hindering the public's ability to accurately understand Romney's record in office. By distorting the facts in order to gain success, McCain clearly partakes in strategic action.



Another example of strategic action occurred when candidates offered empty statements that either failed to answer the question or responded to rhetoric in the first place. In fact, the moderators of these debates often prompted the candidates to use strategic action by posing open questions that did not encourage real debate. The following is an example of such an irrelevant question and a candidate's equally nonsensical response:

Moderator: Governor Romney, Daniel Duchovnik from Walnut Creek, California, wants to know: What do you dislike most about America?

Romney: Gosh. I love America. I'm afraid I'm going to be at a loss for words because America for me is not just our rolling mountains and hills and streams and great cities. It's the American people.

And the American people are the greatest people in the world. What makes America the greatest nation in the world is the heart of the American people: hardworking, innovative, risk-taking, God-loving, family-oriented American people... (MSNBC, 2007a)

In this case strategic action appears to stem from both the structure of the debate (the moderator's question) and from the candidate's choice of response. As is obvious here, when presented with such an open question, Romney happily employs the use of rhetoric to say essentially nothing. While he could have raised legitimate concerns with the direction of United States policy, he instead praised the American public and calls America the "greatest nation in the world." In doing so he backed up his non-response with the use of what I will refer to as the American ideology. This is an ideology in the sense that he makes claims, such as "American people are the greatest people in the world," that are not open to critique. The statement has no real meaning and, thus, can not stand up to a rational argument as it is based in neither truth nor normative values. Additionally, he backs this up with religious ideology, calling Americans "God-loving." This is a case of pure strategic communication. No attempt at reaching understanding or enabling action is present, just praise designed to gain votes and win the nomination.

At its best, this American ideology was propped up by the Constitution. A statement by Dennis Kucinich provides an example of the validity of a constitutional argument as well as how that argument can easily give way to ideology:

Kucinich: This is a pocket copy of the Constitution, which I carry with me, because I took an oath to defend the Constitution.

We've spent a lot of time talking about Iraq here tonight and America's role in the world. This country was taken into war based on lies. This country was taken into war based on lies about weapons of mass destruction and Al Qaida's role with respect to Iraq, which there wasn't one at the time we went in.

I want to state that Mr. Cheney must be held accountable. He is already ginning [sic] up a cause for war against Iran.

Now, we have to stand for this Constitution. We have to protect and defend this Constitution. And this vice president violated this Constitution.

So I think that while my friends on this stage may not be ready to take this stand, the American people should know that there's at least one person running for president who wants to reconnect America with its goodness, with its greatness, with its highest principles, which currently are not being reflected by those who are in the White House. (MSNBC.com, 2007b)

This statement was given in response to a question by the moderator who asked if any of the Democratic candidates supported the impeachment of current vice-president Dick Cheney. Kucinich provides a legitimate basis for his answer in the Constitution. Because the Constitution serves as a legal document for this country (and a normative value), under its laws Cheney violated the Constitution by lying to the country about the threat of nuclear weapons in Iraq. This is a rational argument based on an agreed upon standard for government conduct. But although Kucinich begins with a legitimate argument, he quickly reverts to ideology by calling to “reconnect America with its goodness, with its greatness, with its highest principles.” This statement means little and could not be upheld by rational argument. In fact, by using the same rhetoric of the “goodness” of America, Kucinich in effect supports the empty rhetoric that is so often used against his claims for greater clarity. So although a Constitutional argument may be

legitimate when discussing government actions in the United States, heaping rhetorical praise is not.

At its worse, the use of the American ideology is accompanied by the use of coercive fear. The following quote from Mike Huckabee will serve as an example:

HUCKABEE: -- the fact is when there is a -- when there is a serious threat to this country, it is not a threat because we happen to be peace-loving people; it's a threat because in the heart of the radical Islamic faith -- not all Islam, and that's what's very important. This isn't an Islamic problem; this is a jihadist problem. This is an Islamofascism problem. And if you read the writings of those who most influenced -- and Governor Romney mentioned Said Qutub, executed in Egypt in 1966. He is one of the major philosophers behind this. And the fact is, there is nothing about our attacking them that prompts this. They are prompted by the fact they believe that they must establish a worldwide caliphate that has nothing to do with us other than we live and breathe, and their intention is to destroy us. (NYTimes.com, 2008)

In this statement, Huckabee attempts to completely remove blame from the United States for the current relationship between the United States and more radical segments of the Middle East. Although he justly notes that this is not a battle with the Muslim faith, he repeatedly brings up the threat of “Islamofascism.” By saying that the problem “has nothing to do with us other than we live and breathe, and their intention is to destroy us” Huckabee both removes the ability to come to a diplomatic solution and feeds the fear of a perpetual threat which serves the interest of those who wish to get elected on a platform of aggressive national security. By not questioning the role of the United States, he serves to uphold the American ideology and protect it from the threat of those who call it into question.

### Defining the Role of the Citizen

The debates not only clarify candidates' stances on issues and provide a forum for direct confrontation; they serve as a vehicle for politicians to speak directly to Americans. In these debates policy is specified, promises are made, attacks are launched, and words are continually distorted. In between all of this, candidates illuminate their understanding of American citizenship and lay out a plan for the proper interaction among citizens and their government. As

was previously stated, voters use these debates as a forum for information. Because the debates, then, serve such a crucial function of bridging politicians and citizens, the way that citizenship is discussed is essential to collective and individual understandings of citizenship.

Candidates offer multiple understandings of citizenship, some of which encourage political participation and others which distance elected officials from the control of the public. In the following passages I look at how candidates understand the role of the citizen and how they convey this understanding to the debate audience.

One of the powers granted to the citizens in these debates is the expression of public opinion. Some candidates challenged the validity of a policy proposal based on public disagreement with the plan or called for elected officials to listen more closely to the public. In the following statement Ron Paul uses both arguments calling for an Iraq policy that is consistent with American public opinion:

Representative Ron Paul (R-Texas): ...you might ask the question, why are 70 percent of the American people now wanting us out of there, and why did the Republicans do so poorly last year?

So I would suggest that we should look at foreign policy. I'm suggesting very strongly that we should have a foreign policy of non- intervention, the traditional American foreign policy and the Republican foreign policy.

Throughout the 20th century, the Republican Party benefited from a non-interventionist foreign policy. Think of how Eisenhower came in to stop the Korean War. Think of how Nixon was elected to stop the mess in Vietnam.

How did we win the election in the year 2000? We talked about a humble foreign policy: No nation-building; don't police the world. That's conservative, it's Republican, it's pro-American -- it follows the founding fathers. And, besides, it follows the Constitution. (MSNBC.com, 2007a)

This statement is both an example of communicative action and a call for greater response to public opinion. Paul begins by questioning the validity of a policy (continuing a war) that “70 percent” of Americans are against. He then notes the connection between his policy plan (non-interventionism) and successful elections in the past. Here Paul implies that elected officials

should listen to the will of the American public. In addition, he argues that it is good political strategy to listen to the public. Essentially, Paul falls back on strategic communication, backing his plan with the ideology of Americanism and conservatism. Ultimately though, he reverts to a legitimate argument: his policy is correct because it follows the Constitution. Perhaps most importantly, Paul attempts to include citizens in the debate. By introducing measurements of public opinion Paul actually allows the citizens to be part of the debate and engage in communicative action in the public sphere.

While in this example the importance of public opinion in deciding policy is highlighted, candidates also called for active civic participation in the implementation of their policy proposals, particularly when it came to energy policy. Although the broadcast format of debates prevents candidates and viewers from directly interacting, some candidates were able to engage citizens in communicative action by calling for civic participation. Here Bill Richardson calls on the active involvement of the public in addressing the energy crisis:

GOV. RICHARDSON: ...You know, what we need is an energy revolution in this country. Not some of the bills that the congress has passed. We need to go to 50 miles per gallon fuel efficiency. We need to have 30 percent of all our electricity renewable. We need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by the year 2040. And we need the American people to sacrifice a little bit.

I would ask the American people, when it comes to being more energy-conscious, to be cognizant of appliances, of fuel efficiency, the vehicles we drive, mass transit.  
(NYTimes.com, 2008b)

This serves as an example of both communicative action and a call for public involvement. In this statement Richardson notes the importance of both government implemented policy and the involvement of the American public. Rather than exempting the public from responsibility, he asks Americans to “sacrifice”. While asking people to sacrifice may not be a way to win votes, Richardson states that the involvement of citizens is necessary to carry out a policy proposal and lists specific ways in which citizens can actively contribute to saving energy. This type of call to

civic duty is not prevalent in the debates, but it does appear. This is an example of an attempt at communicative action that involves the public. Richardson not only addresses the public; public consensus is necessary to enact the policy proposal.

Not all candidates, however, express this interest in public involvement. This imparts a very different understanding of the proper role for the citizen in governance. In this excerpt the moderator questions Romney about this detachment from public opinion:

Moderator: Governor Romney, in that same NBC-Wall Street Journal poll that Chris mentioned, 55 percent of Americans say victory is just not possible in Iraq. They've made up their minds on this war. Why shouldn't they have a president who will listen?

Romney: Well, if you wanted to have a president that just followed the polls, all we need to do is plug in our TVs and have them run the country. But that's not what America wants. It's not what America needs. We need leadership that's strong and that shows America what we can do to lead the world. (MSNBC.com, 2007a)

Here, the moderator attempts to involve the public in communicative action, asking why the government should not implement the will of the public. Romney responds that the public does not want or need a president who listens to the polls, thus distancing the government's accountability to such measures of public opinion. His statement echo the "tyranny of the majority" found in *The Federalist Papers*, and is perhaps simply a reflection of the American system of government. In the end, however, this excludes the public from the conversation and from the power of communicative action in the public sphere, a necessity for deliberative democracy.

Another example of this can be found in a question for the Republicans from current president George W. Bush. He asks:

BUSH: (From videotape.) You can't be the president unless you have a firm set of principles to guide you as you sort through all the problems the world faces. And I would be very hesitant to support somebody who relied upon opinion polls and focus groups to define a way forward for a president. It is -- and so my question to -- if I were asking questions to people running for office, I'd say: What are the principles that will stand on in good times and bad times? What would be the underpinning of -- of -- of your decisions? (NYTimes.com, 2008b)

In this question, Bush essentially encourages the candidates to turn a deaf ear to expressions of public opinion. By saying he would be “hesitant to support” a candidate who listened to measurements of public opinion, he implies that a president should not necessarily seek civic input in their decision making. This effectively excludes the public from a place in the public sphere and directly counteracts the goal of the public sphere in a democracy and the role of the citizen in communicative action. This understanding of citizenship detaches the citizen from her government and leaves the citizen with a much more limited role in governance.

### Conclusion

These debates serve as concrete examples of the use of communicative and strategic action in the public sphere. While communicative action certainly occurred, it was often encroached on by strategic action, limiting its ability to generate consensus and understanding in the public sphere. Both the format of the debates and the choices made by candidates contributed to the appearance of strategic action. Although the format of the debates prevented significant interaction amongst the candidates, candidates often failed to engage in communicative action when given the opportunity. Candidates often evaded questions or made claims based on ideology rather than truths and normative values. This dampens the ability of the public to make informed decisions and prevents the debates from fulfilling their purpose in the public sphere. This holds particular import when candidates discuss the role of the citizen. If strategic action is used when defining citizenship in the public sphere, citizens are pushed further away from understanding their own role in the government and being able to effectively act in it.

In order to encourage the debates as a forum for communicative action, and thus deliberative democracy, the format of the debate must be structured to encourage pointed responses and in-depth discussion. Moderators must hold debaters accountable to the topic at hand and debates should be structured to allow for more candidate interaction. By preventing

candidates from questioning one another, some current formats inhibit the ability of opponents to challenge validity claims and provide undue legitimacy to statements made by candidates. If the voting public is to truly understand the plans and intentions of the candidates, the debates must serve as forum for real communicative action in which candidates can truly discuss policies and ideals.



## YOUNG PEOPLE AND DEMOCRACY

After looking at how the contemporary concept of citizenship has been collectively formed in the public sphere, I now turn my attention to young people's perceptions and performances of citizenship.

### Literature Review

Scholars often lament the lack of civic awareness and engagement by young people. Much research in this field indicates that young citizens are both apathetic about the political process and have become disengaged from the traditional forms of political participation, such as voting and party attachment (Barnhurst, 2003; Buckingham, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Zukin et al, 2006).

Almost half of young adults are entirely disengaged from both the political process and civil society (Zukin et al, 2003, p. 193). In the 2004 presidential election, older generations were 19 percent more likely to vote than younger citizens, actually narrowing the 27 percent gap that appeared in the 2000 election (Zukin et al, 2006, p. 69). At a time when young people are still in the process of being politically socialized, the majority of their peers take no part in the political process.

In addition, these young people are often uninformed. According to a national survey conducted by Project Vote Smart, "today's young adults are less politically interested and informed than any cohort of young people on record," (Patterson, 2003, p. 21). And although they do catch some political information from entertainment outlets, including late night talk shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, they doubt the credibility of these sources and are almost apologetic about using them for news (Wells & Dudash, 2007).

In discussions of civic involvement with young international students, Kevin Barnhurst (2003) found evidence of this disengagement, noting the peripheral nature of citizenship in

young adults' lives. He finds that young democratic citizens do not identify strongly with citizenship or pay intentional attention to it; instead they are only sporadically aware of politics, which they engage with largely through the media (Barnhurst, 2003).

Although young citizens may be less likely to engage in the political process anyway, either because they have not yet formed the stable habits of voting (Buckingham, 2000) or because they do not have the heightened political knowledge of their older peers, a generational effect may actually be the cause (Putnam, 2000; Zukin et al, 2006). For example, members of the older generations (Baby Boomers and their elder counterparts) are much more likely to vote and participate in the political process than younger generations, due in part to the cultural climate in which they were raised (Zukin et al, 2006).

The generational gap is often cited as the biggest reason for decline in voter turnout (Putnam, 2000; Zukin et al, 2006), and central to this finding is political socialization. Those who have been raised in eras where political socialization was high remain more active participants than those who were raised in more privatized societies (Putnam, 2000). As Zukin et al (2006) note, "each new cohort has the potential to develop its own worldview, which in turn affects its members' more specific opinions and behaviors," (p. 11) Blaming the younger generation for their lack of interest and engagement may simply divert the attention from a society which does not highly regard civic participation.

## Research Questions

Recognizing these trends, I sought to learn the underlying causes of this distance in order to offer some solutions for it. Hoping to explore how young people understand their role as citizens and how this understanding affects their actions as citizens, the following research questions were asked:

RQ 1: Where do young people form their perceptions of citizenship?

RQ 1a: What media do they look to in reference to civic life?

RQ 1b: What role does interpersonal communication play in their perceptions of citizenship?

RQ 1c: What role does education play in their perceptions of citizenship?

RQ 2: How do young people perceive democratic citizenship?

RQ 2a: How do young people define democracy?

RQ 2b: How do young people understand the role of the citizen in democracy?

RQ 2c: How do young people perceive their own political efficacy in the democratic process?

RQ 3: How do young people enact citizenship?

RQ 3a: How active are young people in politics?

RQ 3b: How important is citizenship in their daily lives?

## Method

To answer these questions I conducted focus groups with college undergraduates at Louisiana State University. Because the concept of citizenship, and thus the practice of citizenship, is created through collective discussion, a format, such as focus groups, in which citizens can discuss these concepts amongst themselves is vital to understanding how the concept of citizenship is created. As Morgan (1996) notes, “What makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of separate individual interviews is the fact that the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other” (p. 139). By encouraging the participants to discuss their understandings of citizenship, I can gain insight into the process of constructing the concept of citizenship.

Another approach to this question might be to conduct ethnographies or participant observations. While this process would likely provide insight into young people’s understandings

and actions as citizens, because of the peripheral nature of citizenship for young adults (Barnhurst 2003), the topic of citizenship would be unlikely to regularly arise in general conversation, thus causing a significant increase in the amount of time needed to observe their identities as citizens. Unlike ethnographies or participant observation, focus groups enable the researcher to “observe a concentrated interaction on a topic in a limited period of time, with the opportunity to raise questions and perspectives that would not naturally occur” (Gamson 1992, p. 192). Although the young people may not regularly talk about citizenship (or perform traditionally civic acts), focus groups will provide insight into their ideas on citizenship by probing them on these issues. As Morgan (1997) notes, focus groups “collect data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. In essence, it is the researcher's interest that provides the focus, whereas the data themselves come from the group interaction” (p. 6). In addition, focus groups allowed me to interact with more participants than would be possible through either an ethnography or participant observation. By conducting multiple focus groups, I explored a greater number of students’ perceptions of citizenship.

College students were chosen for several reasons. First, limiting the age of the sample allowed for a more in-depth discussion. Because different age groups tend to vary markedly in their performances of citizenship (either because of generational differences or because of their different stages in the political socialization process; see Putnam, 2002; Zukin et al, 2006), separating young people from their elder counterparts provided a more focused discussion of the perceptions and performances of citizenship for one specific age group, eliminating some of the discrepancies that may arise from including citizens of all ages. College-aged students are on the cusp of legal adulthood and the beginning of the voting process. Because they are still in the process of forming the habits of citizenship (Buckingham, 2000), their understanding of citizenship holds particular significance for the future of democratic governance in the United

States. How they understand citizenship may have a considerable impact on the shape and health of democracy in the near future. Finally, college students were chosen for convenience. Because this project is being conducted as a thesis with limited funding and time, the availability of college students on college campuses serves to ease the research process.

In order to further homogenize the sample to be tested, non-students and younger children were also excluded from the study. Although young students are also in the process of forming the habits of citizenship, they likely vary markedly from college-aged students in their understandings and performances of citizenship (Buckingham 2000). In addition to having less civic education than college students, they are below the voting age and still dependent on their parents. In addition, non-students of the same age would certainly provide insight into young people's perceptions of citizenship, but would again diversify the study, particularly because of differences in education. Because this study is limited in time and funding, a more homogenous sample will allow me to more quickly reach an understanding of one group's perceptions and performances of citizenship.

Because the group under study was comprised of college undergraduates at LSU, a few notes on LSU students and Louisiana's political culture will provide incite into their responses. First, as LSU has somewhat selective admissions standards, the students in this study may be considered fairly well educated. Second, Louisiana is mired by a tradition of political scandals (Parent, 2006). Because many of these students are from Louisiana originally, they have been raised in a climate of political scandal and may have a greater sense of mistrust of elected officials and the government than students from other states. Finally, the majority of students attending LSU are ideologically conservative (Yale Daily News, 2003) and the participants' responses may reflect their political leanings.

### Conducting the Focus Groups

In order to hone the topics for discussion and to provide better focus to both the discussion and the results produced from it, I first conducted a pilot study. For the pilot study, I recruited two groups of undergraduates at LSU. The participants for the pilot study were recruited through e-mail and the snowballing technique. After sending the request to participate to a number of students in a non-majors introduction to mass communication class, I then asked the interested responders to recruit their friends for a group discussion. I chose to use groups who were already well acquainted in order to ease the conversation and in hopes that participants would be more willing to discuss the topics amongst themselves instead of responding directly to the researcher. Although the potential for group think runs high with groups who already know one another, in the pilot study I found the opposite in that the participants were willing to speak up if they disagreed with each other and would readily talk over one another. The two groups chosen for the pilot study consisted of nine women and two men, all Caucasian, between the ages of 18 and 22. In exchange for their participation, participants were provided with a pizza dinner.

For the pilot groups, I constructed my discussion topics based on the three central research questions: how do young citizens perceive democratic citizenship, how did they form this understanding, and how does this perception of citizenship affect how they act as citizens? A complete list of the initial pilot study discussion topics can be found in Appendix B.

One of the most significant contributions of the pilot study was the addition of asking the participants for their definition of democracy. Though asking such a direct question may make some of the participants uncomfortable, the question was crucial to understanding how the participants understood the role of citizenship in the democratic process. In addition, having a group of people who were comfortable with one other allowed them to collectively construct their definition of citizenship. Rather than allowing one person to provide the definition, the

participants tended to add bits and pieces of their own understandings to the group conversation, eventually building a conception of citizenship.

Learning from the pilot study, some alterations were made to the research plan. Because students recruited through e-mail in the pilot study tended to be unresponsive, the rest of the focus groups were recruited through student organizations. After contacting the presidents of several organizations, I was able to set up four additional groups. These groups consisted of 26 additional students, mostly Caucasian, with approximately even numbers of males and females. Although a small number of African-Americans were included, one fault of the study is the absence of greater diversity. Two of the groups I consider “expert” groups. All of the students in these groups were in either their junior or senior year in mass communication, with the majority specializing in political communication. These groups were included to see how students who studied political communication as a profession differed from other college students in their perceptions and performances of citizenship. In total, the focus groups included 35 college students between the ages of 18 and 24. I conducted focus groups until I reached a point of saturation. This was evident when the students’ answers became predictable and no new information was being raised in the discussions.

The discussions took place in the evening on LSU’s campus, and students received a pizza dinner for their participation. I moderate the focus groups, which lasted between approximately 45 minutes and one hour and 45 minutes. Participants were first asked to introduce themselves, stating their first names, ages, and majors. While I allowed the flow of conversation to determine question order, I generally began the focus groups with a discussion of their media habits, particularly concerning political news.

The discussion topics were revised after the initial pilot study, but still center around the themes found in the research questions: political information gathering, perceptions of

citizenship, and performances of citizenship. A complete list of the discussion topics used in the final focus groups can be found in Appendix B. The discussion topics served as a guide to ensure that all necessary topics were discussed, but I diverted from the guide as the discussions progressed. The arrangement of topics emanated largely from the group discussions in an attempt to capture as closely as possible how the participants themselves related these issues with one another.

The discussions were audio recorded. During the discussion I took a few notes but relied mainly on the audio recording for a record of the discussion. I attempted to remove myself from the conversation as much as possible in order to minimize my effect on the participants' responses. I presented the topics for discussion but did not take part in the discussion myself aside from probing questions based on participants' responses. I transcribed each focus group, only slightly editing the transcripts in order to make the conversations more legible in reading. The participants' speech patterns, such as the use of "like," however, remain largely unedited.

### Analysis

I analyzed the results using an inductive process, following the approach provided by David Thomas (2006). Thomas (2006) states that the primary objective of the inductive process is, "to allow the research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (p. 238). During this stage, I looked for recurrent themes found throughout all of the groups. Following a close reading of the transcripts, 25 themes were identified. Coding categories were created from these themes, and excerpts of the transcripts were gathered under their appropriate categories for comparison. These were then used to compare and contrast the responses of participants throughout all of the groups, looking for how their statements on similar topics compared with one another. Next these themes were organized according to the research questions. Under each



question, the pertinent coded excerpts were gathered and themes were collapsed into the structure of the research questions. In both cases, a constant comparison was used among the individual responses to see if the identified themes held up or collapsed when examined in tandem with the findings from other groups.

## Focus Group Results

### Political Information Gathering

These young adults create their understandings of citizenship through three central avenues: the media, civic education, and interpersonal communication. Each plays a unique role in shaping their concept of citizenship and each plays a significant part in determining how these students understand their role as citizens.

#### The Media

The media stands out as a source of political information for these young people. Although other sources, such as friends, family, and the education system, were also instrumental in crafting their perceptions of citizenship, the students continually reverted to the media as a source of political information. The way they use the media and what outlets they choose to use, however, vary widely from student to student. In discussing these young students media use I will first focus on their media habits before discussing how they perceive the media.

While some of these students are habitual consumers of traditional news sources, others only attend to it sporadically. The difference between these two extremes can be found in the distinction between these two students' (from different groups) account of their attention to traditional sources of news:

P1: I'll sit there and watch it if someone else has it own, but I don't purposely turn it on.

P2: I wake up in the morning and turn CNN on and then I make my cup of coffee and check Facebook and do that stuff. And then in my e-mail I have *The Post* and *New York Times*. And I go to Daily Cause, and I read *The Hill* and all that other stuff cause that's where I choose to get my news from.

Obviously these two students have radically different news habits. While one claims to only catch the news in passing, the other has a daily routine of checking multiple media outlets. Of course, most students fell somewhere in between these two extremes. Some keep cable news on in the background, and others quickly browse the news from Yahoo! when logging on to check their e-mail. It appears that with a plethora of opportunities to choose from students play a very active role in their decision to receive political information.

Although some students do not pay regular attention to traditional news sources, those that do tend to form fairly stable news habits. Here one young woman explains her morning news ritual:

I have a little ritual. Like, I'll get up and it's 7, and I'll turn on the *Today Show*. And yeah, I know it's not great news, but I do it. It's a habit. But I put on the *Today Show* while I get ready and watch that.

The important note here is that she doesn't necessarily think the Today Show is the best source of information, as noted by the remark "I know it's not great news," but that she continues to turn to it as a news source out of habit.

The theme of ritual news consumption appeared frequently among students who are regular consumers of news. Some even went so far as to compare their news habit to religious practice. One young woman stated, "Yeah. Well I'm Fox News, so religiously, it's the only thing I watch except *Criminal Minds*." Beyond comparing her news habits to a religion, this student's news habit has become part of her identity. In addition to repeatedly referring to Fox News when discussing her media usage, in this quote she says "I'm Fox News." Here she creates an identity for herself as a Fox News viewer.

As is obvious, these news habits played a significant role in determining which outlets the students went to in search of political news. The two most frequently cited sources of news were television and the Internet. Though a few students did claim to read the newspaper

regularly, more often these students go to their televisions and computers when seeking news.

One student explains his use of the two mediums this way:

I mean TV is you know, cable news is becoming more and more annoying I guess, but I watch it just because, you know you flip it on and it's on. That's interesting and you watch it for a second, but the Internet is really where I kind of in the morning get all the information, news, that I want because I can go there and I'm not forced to wait around for CNN to come on the topic that I'm interested in.

This quote neatly summarizes the general findings about these students' news habits. First, he expresses his ability to choose between different outlets when seeking news. In this case he chooses to rely on both television and the Internet. Second, he expresses the habitual nature of his news habits. While he goes to the Internet for information every morning, he also regularly watches the news, even though he doesn't necessarily expect to gain any new information by watching it.

Now, I turn my attention to entertainment news. For many students who don't pay regular attention to traditional news sources, entertainment sources, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, serve as their primary source of political information. As one student put it, "I know it's the most cliché thing in the world to say when you're a college kid, but I actually get a lot of political information from *The Daily Show*."

Aside from the cliché, students' relationship with shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*<sup>2</sup> are not universal. While some used the entertainment format to supplement their regular use of traditional sources, for others watching *The Daily Show* was the only news habit. For these students, the comedy shows often serve as the main source of information about current political events and can even serve to spur interest in politics in general. As one student states, "And the *Colbert Report*, I mean I know for me personally they played a huge role in me becoming more political, more politically savvy, more politically active, I think more informed."

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<sup>2</sup> Although late night broadcast talk shows, such as *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, or generally included in this category they are not discussed here because the students never mentioned them as sources of political information.

Students who habitually used traditional news sources, however, saw the comedy shows as a supplement to their regular sources. In fact, proponents of the *Daily Show* often saw it as serving a broader purpose than entertainment. For these students, *The Daily Show* put the news presented by traditional sources into context:

P1: I think it's interesting too, because... when you know CNN says so and so has a new commercial, we're going, well okay what does this mean, and what are they trying to do, and why are they showing it to this audience. And in your head you're trying to like dissect the thing. And you watch *The Daily Show* and they're making fun of it, and you're like, okay we can laugh at this too. It's funny.

P2: Cause sometimes you don't even realize how ridiculous the stuff is, yeah. You get so into it you don't really, like you said it's in a different context.

In this instance, *The Daily Show* serves to clarify the news presented by traditional sources.

Not all students, however, saw the benefit in entertainment news. Some held the opposite view, seeing the entertainment format as a detriment to the exchange of information in the public sphere. One student expresses her dissatisfaction with the use of entertainment in politics, saying:

It's not okay because I think it kind of like shortens our attention span, and it also, like, minimized what we're really actually read[ing] and look[ing] at because ... if CNN is showing Ballot Bowl well that's entertaining for me, cause I'm gonna be like, okay who's winning in this like Super Bowl political thing. But if they had just presented straight facts, it'd probably be less engaging for me to watch it just because we grew up in this entertainment age.

In this case, the student fears that the presence of entertainment in the news media crowded out the room for rational political discussion by creating an environment in which viewers expect entertainment rather than information.

The disagreement about the usefulness of entertainment in political news leads to a discussion of how these students' perceive the news media. Although a few students did express some faith in the news, for the most part students were wary of bias in both traditional news sources and entertainment sources.

When these students did appear to trust the news, it was most often relegated to specific media outlets and did not carry over into a trust of the media as a whole. For example, the self-identified Fox News viewer expressed her trust in Fox but did not transfer that trust to other sources of information. When I asked her group if they found news sources credible she responded:

P1: Yeah, I'm definitely, I'm definitely. But I'm a loyalist; I'm a loyalist with Fox. Kind of, it's more of a relationship. So with them very much so. Now I do become skeptical when I sometimes watch other programs, so maybe the trust is not so much there. Local news, because I've taken a lot of broadcast journalism classes, and we've analyzed local news no not at all. *The Advocate* [Baton Rouge's local newspaper] sometimes I see a lot of faults sitting there, just in the way the story's written. But national media, like Fox, yeah I do trust. Blogs though, I don't do the blog thing at all.

P2: They're angry.

This excerpt contains several relevant pieces. First, because she identifies with Fox News she trusts it as a news source. However, this trust doesn't carry over to other news outlets for a variety of reason. While formatting problems dissuade her from trusting local news, the nature of blogs appears to prevent her from using them as a source of information. As another member of her group put it, "They're angry." This sense of anger actually appeared rather frequently when discussing user-generated news sources. Although some students did use sources such as Facebook (a social networking Website) and blogs for gaining information, they often expressed a distrust of these sources and a sense that the writers were too opinionated to be counted as relevant sources of information.

Distrust, however, was not isolated to user-generated sources and local news. In fact, the fear of bias was a frequent concern of students in these groups. For some the appearance of bias dissuaded them from paying attention to the news at all. As one young woman stated, "I don't watch the news personally, because they talk a bunch of crap." Others still chose to seek political news but noted that audience members must remain critical of the information received from

news sources. One student said, “You have to be critical of everything you watch. You can’t let people think for you, you have to think for yourself that’s how I feel.”

Finally, a look at these students’ attention to and perception of the presidential primaries will serve as a concrete example of how these young students make meaning out of a specific situation presented through the news media. While a few students watched the debates themselves, more often students received information about the debates from secondary sources in the media.

One interesting example of this was a student whose knowledge of the debates stemmed primarily from *The Daily Show*. He said:

I think for the young people in particular I think that *The Daily Show* route is a very effective one because, you know, I’m not gonna sit and watch a two hour debate. As much as I like to stay politically savvy, I’m not gonna sit down and watch C-Span for three hours or watch all the Republican debate for three hours, you know. But I usually pretty much daily find an hour to sit down and listen to *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, and, you know, it’s like a highlight. It’s like *Sports Center*. It gives you what you need to know for people who are busy or just don’t have the patience to sit through a long arduous thing like that. There’s still a way for those people to become informed and know what’s going on.

So, although he is not watching the debates themselves he still feels like he is being informed through *The Daily Show*. In addition, he notes the time concern that many students expressed. With busy schedules many of these students said that they did not have the time to watch a two hour debate. At least in this example, it appears that without the presence of *The Daily Show* this student would receive little if any information about the debates. Through *The Daily Show* he at least hears the “highlights.”

Other students, however, felt that the pull of entertainment negatively impacted both the news coverage and the debate itself. The following extended excerpt is taken from a discussion with one of the expert groups:

P1: Like when Ron Paul and McCain. Like Ron Paul was asking McCain, like how do you feel about this, this, and this, and McCain was laughing like, oh you old man. Like he

was just laughing, you know. And it would have been cool if he'd have been like, no this is my stance when Ron Paul was asking him. But McCain was like, I'm not even gonna answer you because you're foolish.... But it would have been cool to see him say something back. But it was funnier to see him not say anything back, and he got more headlines that he didn't say anything then if he would have said something

P2: I think that they're just so afraid to open themselves up to criticism, but they're all...

P3: The media's so bad they'll hop right on them, any way they waiver.

P2: The gotcha game

P3: The caught ya moment

P1: You say the wrong adjective or adverb, they're like, oh, you're flip-flopping, oh, you didn't say that last time. You're like, I said "is" instead of "are." I mean sorry. Like you're flip-flopping if you say anything different.

Here, the students are disappointed by both the news media and the candidate himself, and they lay the blame on the entertainment aspect. The first student recognized the appearance of strategic communication when McCain refused to engage in rational debate with Paul and saw it is a strategy designed by McCain to gain more press coverage. The students then begin lamenting the way that the media covers the debates in general, this time pointing out the absence of the ability of the candidates to engage in communicative action. In essence, they see the entertainment aspect of the media as having a negative impact on the candidates ability to provide information to the audience.

In sum, these students are generally disheartened by the tone of the contemporary news media and disagree about the usefulness of entertainment in the news. Because they are wary of the news, they actively seek out sources that they feel they can trust and tend to doubt other media outlets. In the end, most of these students are paying attention to political news, even if in some cases only through entertainment sources. It appears that much of the research that casts a dim light on young people's news habits may fail to take into account the information that they do receive from nontraditional sources. Even if these students are not adamant adherents to daily

newspaper reading, they are still conversant in the language of news and current events and have developed their own understandings of what news is and where they should go to find it.

### Civic Education

Another significant factor in the formation of these young citizens' perceptions of democracy and their role in the democratic process stems from their civic education. Although all reported having at least some form of civic education, generally in high school, many of the students were dissatisfied with that education, noting the lack of practical knowledge that they gained from it. When students were satisfied with their civics education at least one of two factors were involved: a good teacher or a hands on extracurricular program. I will begin by discussing the good side of civic education before turning to the lack of civic education that many of these students received.

Some of the students I spoke with had had the opportunity in high school to take part in some sort of extracurricular program related to politics. Generally, these students tended to be the more politically involved and informed than their peers who had not participated in such programs (although a correlation here must note that the students who chose to participate in these programs likely already had an interest in politics). Some examples of these programs are Youth Legislature, Close Up, and Girls State. Although the specifics of these programs vary, they all share the attribute of increasing civic knowledge through hands on learning. For example at Girls State high school students come together for a week in the summer to form their own political system, complete with separate branches of government, a party system, and elections. In the Close Up program students are brought to Washington D.C. and given access to political proceedings designed to increase their understanding of the political process.

Here, one student explains the benefits of providing high school students with such tools:

I mean a situation like that [Close Up] kind of forces you to sit down and take the time and actually listen because you're ... taken out of your natural setting and you're



completely submerged in this political experience... I think programs like that are another really powerful tool in getting young people more involved because I can honestly say that was the first time, that was the beginning of my entire interest in politics was the close up program.

For this student, the Close Up program was formative in his interest in politics. Not only did it provide insight into the political process, but it encouraged him to take an interest in it even after the program was over.

Teachers also appear instrumental in the formation of these students' political understandings. For a few students, good teachers piqued their interest in politics and encouraged their involvement even after they were no longer in the class. Here a young woman describes the impact one teacher had on her:

I had an amazing history teacher, and I can still remember the lessons that we had on democracy and America and American history. And I still remember that, and I remember that when I was little, I looked forward to 18 so I could get my voters registration.

In this instance one teacher was able to have a lasting impact on this young person's civic involvement. Even though the class was not specifically a civics class, the teacher was able to inspire the student to engage in political activity long after she had graduated from that class.

Unfortunately, most students were dissatisfied with their overall civic education. Even those who had participated in extracurricular activities often lamented the lack of education they received in the classroom. The dissatisfaction was particularly high among those who had attended a Louisiana public high school. For them, civics class lasted only half of a school year with the other half being devoted to free enterprise. One student explains his experience with this system, stating, "It's half a year were you go through rep[resentative]s, senators, all that stuff, and then it's like, see ya. And then you don't talk about it in social studies, but you have social studies every year so it's not very good." This student notes that even though the opportunity to

teach civics arises in other subjects, such as social studies, the study of civics received a very limited amount of attention in his high school.

Aside from the limited amount of time spent on civic education, the way in which these classes were taught often failed to provide these students with the knowledge to practice citizenship. One student states:

Nobody ever presented it to us like, this is what your role as a good, as a citizen, and this is something you can do about it. Like let's do a project. Let's give examples. What do you want to see changed? What do you want to know? As far as, like, you can change something, the furthest we got to that was the [School House Rock] I am a bill video.

Here, the student says that no one taught her to actually be a citizen. She was never told how to use her role as a citizen to implement change. In addition, she points out another problem with the teaching of civics education: no one prompted them to seek change or ask questions about their government. No one asked her "What do you want to know?"

Several students appeared to share this sentiment, seeing their civics class as a lesson in rote memorization rather than a process of learning through communication and interaction. In this exchange, two students discuss the way their classes were structured, and in turn comment on the high school education system.

P1: It's always so, learn it in class memorize it, take it for the test, forget about it, and that's just how it is.

P2: But I felt that way about all of high school. I did enough to get by, and I got by, and now I'm in college.

In essence, these students were not taught to understand civics. Instead they were encouraged to memorize information in order to pass a test.

Finally, some students suggested that perhaps because of a fear of coming off biased, their teachers had failed to explain to them the differences between the parties or how they could actually participate in politics.

High school did a bad job about that [civic education]. I really don't even think I learned anything in high school about politics. I know in my school our teachers were told to be very basically neutral when it comes to politics, they weren't supposed to give us their political views because it could influence the children, which they can, you know, in turn say something that their parents might not like, and then it backfires so I don't think I learned anything about politics in high school.

In this case the fear of bias that prevented several students from trusting the media also prevented teachers from teaching. As this young man states, because the teachers' speech was limited the children were deprived of a practical understanding of how the political process works. The end of this statement is a good example of how most of the students ultimately felt about their civics education, "I don't think I learned anything about politics in high school."

#### Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication serves as the final source for these young people's perceptions of citizenship. Here, I am primarily concerned with the conversations these young adults have with their friends and families and how these conversations shape their understanding as citizenship. For most of these students, their parents played a formative role in building their understandings of citizenship. Friends, however, appear to take a more limited role as most of these students do not claim to frequently talk with their friends about politics. I will begin with an examination of the role of the family.

Several students openly recognized the formative role their parents played in their civic development. One stated:

I definitely moved somewhat away from my parent's belief. Both of my parents are strong Republicans, and we would talk about politics all throughout when I was growing up... We would yell at the TV together and watch the McLaughlin Group, and it was a big part of who our family was as Southern white Christians, to be political, to be involved. And coming to the university exposed me to a lot of different people, a lot of different beliefs and things that I think really improved me as a citizen. But I definitely I would still consider myself a Republican.

This student recognizes the role her parents had in her own political development but also states that as she has gotten older she has formed her own opinions. Several of the participants expressed a similar political development: initially siding with their parents but attempting to decide for themselves as they aged.

For others, forming their own opinion actually prevented them from having political conversations with their parents. One student said, “We just don’t talk about it because I don’t want to cause tension.” Afraid that their differing political views would lead to disagreement, this student instead refrains from political conversation with them altogether.

Some are simply hesitant to believe their parents. Again the fear of bias that prevents these students from trusting the news and their teachers from talking about politics infiltrates their willingness to talk about politics with members of their family. One young woman discusses the reason that she is hesitant to engage in political conversation with members of her family:

I think I’m really skeptical about what my family says, just because my dad is ultra ultra liberal and... anytime you hear something from him I would think it’s slanted to that view. And then I have my older brother who’s like a big influence on me, who’s ultra conservative, who is the exact opposite of the spectrum, and he’ll send me things like Obama is like this terrorist and like things like that... and I’m like, that’s just not true. So I don’t really believe what comes from either side of them because I know that they’re both so polarized that they’re not gonna listen to anything that’s against they’re own views.

While the family’s role appears to manifest itself through the formation of political preferences, friends play a different role in political socialization. If these young students claimed to talk about politics with their friends, the conversations generally pertained to current events. One student discussed the recent increase in political conversation amongst his friends that accompanied the presidential primary season:

[We talk more about politics] more so now that the presidential election is getting closer and closer. You know who’s running for the president, and the primaries, and stuff like that tends to come up more, you know, as stuff like that is just everywhere in the news.

Other students, however, feel that their friends are not interested in politics; therefore, they do not discuss politics with their friends. One young woman stated, “Most time I talk to my peers, they’re like, I hate politics, politics is bogus.” Even if they themselves express an interest in politics, they may not discuss it with their friends who they feel are not interested.

In general, while interpersonal political communication does occur, these students are hesitant to use their family and friends as a source for political information. Either afraid of the bias held by their families or wary of bringing up boring conversation, interpersonal communication is often thwarted.

In sum, these students received information from a variety of sources and received different types of information from different sources. Some are surrounded by political information and have received practical civic education while others contact politics only in passing and have never really been educated in the role of citizenship. Still, these students do hold political opinions and knowledge, and as we will see next, all have at least some understanding of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy.

### Perceptions of Democratic Citizenship

For these young people, perceptions of citizenship are made up of several components. Their concepts of democracy and citizenship are important to this perception as well as the way they view their role in the governing process.

### Definitions of Democracy

The first step towards understanding perceptions of democratic citizenship is understanding perceptions of democracy itself. As has been stated, I asked each group directly to define democracy. The responses varied rather dramatically between the groups, but two main themes were prevalent: government by the people and I don’t know. I will first discuss the classic definition, government by the people, before examining the other responses.

At least some members of all but two of the groups were able to answer the question directly and succinctly with a clear conception of the basic presumption of democracy, government by the people. Below are two such responses received in separate groups:

P1: It's just by the people for the people.

P2: Isn't it the ability to let the people who are governed choose their government.

These responses center around the people, but they don't provide a clear explanation for the way that government should work. In fact, examined closely the two answers are quite distinct. The first response implies that the public rules itself, "by the people." The second response, however put the people in the position of the "governed." In this response self-government exists through choosing leaders to govern, not by governing oneself.

This dichotomy appeared repeatedly in definitions of democracy. While some centered democracy in the ability of citizens to vote, others centered it on the ability to govern. Some students recognized the disconnect between these two versions and compared the "true" or "official" version of democracy against the system of government in the United States. Here, one student presents such a definition:

I think that true democracy would be we are the people, whatever the people wanted would happen but the way that this country, that's not how it works and they did that for a reason.

The "they" here refers to the founding fathers. Particularly in the "expert" groups, students would discuss the difference between these conceptions of democracy before backing the leadership based model on the intentions of the founding fathers.

A few students recognized the role of communication in democracy and defined it in deliberative terms. One member of an expert group stated:

It's as little as maybe we feel we can penetrate, or we can get through. There is a dialogue. There is an active dialogue, an open conversation. And I guess when you start to look at what's not a democracy that's one of the first things you point out, of a, you

know, muzzled media or something like that. I mean we have representation, elected by us for us, and conversation.

This student has a clear understanding of how democracy can be acted out. She discusses the importance of “active” communication for democracy but also recognizes the role of representation. Such answers were rare, but their presence is heartening.

Though some students were able to offer such an understanding of democracy, others offered less clear definitions. One student said that democracy is “supposed to be like equal or something.” Another said it was a “way to fix problems.” While both might be goals of democracy, they cannot be equated to democracy.

Finally, several students just did not know how to define democracy. Aside from the students who stayed silent when this question was asked (as of course occurred to some extent with nearly every question), some students openly admitted that they could not define democracy. Students responded with “I don’t know” and “No, I really have no idea.” One student offered an apologetic, “The way citizens feel about things?” before admitting, “I really don’t know.”

Again, the ability of the students to define democracy changed with each group. Some students have clear definitions of democracy while others simply do not. Generally, the more informed a student was about politics and the government in general, the clearer their understanding of democracy.

#### Role of Citizenship in Democracy

Contrary to the traditional understanding of Americans as individualistic and rights oriented (Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991), these students spoke about citizenship largely in terms of responsibility and community. One student said that she thought citizenship means, “being part of a whole. Like working toward positive change alongside other people who live around you who are working toward the same goals.” Another stated “I think that citizenship and

being a citizen is synonymous with responsibility.” These students saw citizenship as an active act based in improving the community. In addition, some thought about citizenship in global terms, seeing themselves as citizens of the world before United States citizens.

The one student who did specifically mention rights eventually explained that by rights he means the right to act as a citizen. He stated:

Citizenship is really just being involved and educated, you know. Citizenship is the right for you to voice your own opinion. I mean particularly in a democracy, I mean citizenship gives you the right to be involved in, you know, the day to day workings of your country, and I think to me the biggest part of citizenship is just you know exercising that right to be a part of your government. I think that’s to me that’s the biggest part of citizenship in I guess the traditional sense of the word, is I guess just exercising your right to be a citizen.

Though he mentions rights here, the rights he mentions are the ability for citizens to participate in government. In addition, he says that the “biggest part of citizenship” is exercising those rights. Essentially, though he uses the traditional ideals of a rights based citizenry, he is actually speaking in terms of responsibility.

If these young people understand citizenship largely in terms of responsibility, it is important to now understand what it is these citizens feel responsible to do. How do they understand the role of the citizen in democratic government? Most notably, they define responsibility in terms of informedness. As one student stated, “I think it’s more important to be informed than involved.” And although they claim that responsibility is an important part of citizenship, they are often afraid of civic participation, largely because they fear the “tyranny of the majority.” In some instances this fear is even internalized, and these students doubt their own ability to self-govern.

The fear of civic ignorance was one of the most prevalent themes running through these conversations. Several students expressed a concern that other citizens were not informed enough to make good decisions for society. Some students even argued for mandatory



citizenship classes or requiring potential voters to pass a test. The students were rather blatant about their concern with the ability of others to self-govern. One student said, “I don’t want us to have a direct democracy because people are pretty dumb.”

This argument was often used to hail the representative system of government and the “brilliance” of the founding fathers. Students repeatedly argued that the purpose of the representative system was to provide a “buffer” between the citizens and the government. In the following statement, a student explains the need for representation:

What the majority feels isn’t always what’s best for the country or for the people, you know. We don’t always know what’s best for ourselves, whether we think it or not. And I think in voting for a certain candidate I think that’s me kind of saying I have the confidence in you to make the right decisions, and even if it’s not the popular decision that I have enough faith in you to assume that if you’re going against what everyone else wants then there’s a, you know, there’s a reason I don’t understand, and it’s... what’s best for the country and what’s best for the people.

In this quote, the young man, claims that the country does not always know what is in its best interest. Instead of excluding himself from the ignorant masses, however, he includes himself.

The internalization of the fear of the “tyranny of the majority” was another very common theme. Even within the expert group, several students doubted their own ability to self-govern, fearing they did not have enough information to make good decisions. Here, one young woman again praises the representative system while doubting her ability to self-govern:

I think the system we have is much more practical, obviously. You know not every person can be completely informed, and I mean I don’t think that I should make a decision when someone else, I mean I think I should have a say in choosing who’s making those decisions, but I mean I can’t know about every detail of policy issue and that’s why we have representatives.

The self-doubt due to a perceived lack of knowledge is evident here. This young woman does not feel like she should make government decisions because she is not informed enough to do so.

This self-doubt can be paralyzing for some students. As a student from one of the expert groups stated:

I feel like, I as a college student, my lack of experience is almost like, it gives me enough knowledge to know a little bit about a lot of things, but I don't think I'm like an expert on a single source. Like the Reveille [LSU's campus newspaper] ran this article, and maybe I disagreed with it. I wouldn't feel like I had enough expertise to actually write a letter and not get chastised for it or like realize that, no actually, you're wrong.

In this instance, even a very knowledgeable and informed student was afraid of writing into her campus paper because she did not feel that she was informed enough to do so.

A minority of the students, however, did not share a fear of the "tyranny of the majority."

These students felt that the right to involvement was inherent in a democracy. Here, a student defends the right for all citizens to take part in the political process:

I don't think there's any possible way that you shouldn't be able to say the people shouldn't be able to influence the government immediately because what does it say in the preamble to the Constitution? It's a government by the people for the people. And if you're saying it's by the people for the people, but the people aren't allowed to influence it, that's like an oxymoron.

This student uses the same Constitutional argument as those who praised the representative system, but here she defends the right of citizens to influence the government.

For the most part these students see citizenship as a responsibility to be informed. Many of them felt that before getting involved people should be informed and feared involvement by those they considered uninformed. Often students set the information standard so high that they themselves could not reach it, effectively doubting their own right to take part in the democratic process.

### Efficacy

Now I turn to the concept of political efficacy. Although many of these students may not be eager to have the public involved in the political process, their feelings of political efficacy essentially rest on their ability to feel that they *can* have influence over the political process. In these discussions, students mentioned three main ways that the public could influence the

government: through organization, through the media, and by becoming political leaders themselves.

When asked if the people had the power to influence the government, many of the students responded that the people have the potential of power through organization. As one young woman stated, “You as one person with another person, with another person. That’s the only way I can think about it.” While these students did not necessarily believe that individuals could influence the political process they did have faith in the ability of organizations to create change.

Others pointed to the media as the avenue through which efficacy could be realized. These students tended to believe that by going through the media, individuals could gain popular support and, thus, affect change. Here, one student expresses this sentiment, “If you want to have a voice, if you, it kind of ties back into media. If you voice your opinion very loudly, people notice you, and then you can make people believe what you believe and things like that.” In this case, the media is used to change public opinion, which in turn will create political change.

Finally, some of these students discussed efficacy in terms of leadership. Rather than defining themselves as average citizens attempting to create change from outside the political system, they felt that they could best achieve change as political professionals. One student expressed her desire to create change as a politician before recognizing how her own feelings of efficacy were a reflection of the current political system:

And I don’t even think about the media I think about it as, and this is so idealistic, but... [I] could see myself being an elected official one day, you know, so when I think about change that I want to enact or goals that I want the country to turn towards, that’s the avenue I think about. And I guess that shows how we’re built. You have to be the leader to do the change, to make the change.

Possibly recognizing her limited ability to enact change as a regular citizen, this student aspired to be a politician in order to make change. In addition, she notes the limited power of the citizen to create change, stating, “You have to be the leader... to make the change.”

This uncertainty about the citizens’ ability to “make change” was also held by those who did not appear to have high levels of political efficacy. One student said, “Because it doesn’t make a difference that’s why I always talk myself out of it.” These students doubted their ability to influence the government and were sometimes dissuaded from participation because of it. For some of these students, feelings of inefficacy were directly linked to their opinions about elected officials. As one young woman stated:

What irks me, a lot of times, especially nowadays is that you elect a president for, you know, the values that he says that he has, and then when he gets in office he doesn’t carry out those policies and those things that he said he was gonna, he was going to enact.

Students who expressed this concern did not trust that their elected officials would be responsive to the public who they had been elected to represent.

Efficacy did appear to increase, however, as the size of government decreased. These students often felt that they had a greater ability to influence local government than national government. As one student stated simply, “The more local you get with your government, the more people have an influence over it.” Though many of the students in these discussions do not feel that they can impact the federal government, they do have a sense of greater influence over local government.

### Performances of Citizenship

Finally, we turn to young people’s civic action. Like their media habits and political knowledge, these students display a wide range of civic participation. Though some are very active in the political process others are almost entirely disengaged. Many, however, rest

somewhere in the middle, fulfilling their “responsibility” to be informed but failing to participate in more social forms of civic action.

Particularly in the expert groups, some of these students are active in almost every aspect of political participation. They vote regularly, volunteer for campaigns, register voters, write letters, stay informed, and participate in social networking. One heavily involved student stated, “[I] vote all the time, care, consume news, talk about it to other people, worked for a congressman, I hope I’m a good citizen yeah.”

These students are highly politically active and tend to view themselves as leaders. Several of these students are involved in student government and local elections. They take part in local politics and stay informed about national politics. For these students, citizenship appears to be a central part of their identity. In short, these students tend to live up to most ideals of citizenship by being both active and knowledgeable participants.

The majority of students, however, do not quite reach these high ideals, although many are involved in at least some aspects of civic participation. These students are moderately active, but unlike their highly active counterparts, citizenship does not play a central role in their lives. The most common form of involvement for these less involved citizens is voting. Most students in this category are registered and had voted in at least one election. Several had volunteered at least sporadically in recent years and a few wrote letters to either their congressmen or local media outlets. These students generally hold a passable amount of political knowledge, but are generally not as informed about either current events or the political process as their more active peers.

Finally we turn to the uninvolved. These students are almost entirely disengaged from the political process. Many have never voted and several are not registered. They do not volunteer or express their public opinion. If any political engagement does occur, it is generally through the

news media or in conversations with friends. These students, however, do not have regular news habits and often fail to understand basic aspects of the political system such as the differences between the Republican and Democrat parties.

Across all of these groups, students cited time as an impediment to their involvement. Even for those who are highly involved, time appeared to be a problem. As one highly involved student stated:

We have a pretty rigorous schedule at LSU. I mean just the obvious time factors, you know. There's so many times where I read an article where I'm infuriated, or... why didn't this person hit this point in this debate or something like that, but you know I've got a paper due tomorrow.

So although this student expresses an interest in being more actively involved, her competing priorities limit her ability to devote time to her role as a citizen.

Another deterrent to involvement is difficulties with voter registration. Again, even for those that are highly politically involved, registration is a significant hurdle in the voting process. The following quote provides an example of the burden registration appears to place on the voting process for these young people living rather transient lives between their college residences and their parents' homes:

Cause right now [my registration's] back in my hometown, so I only get to vote for the major things. When I actually care whether Rouzan [a local community development] gets passed or not. But I don't have a say in that because it's my fault I didn't transfer.

This quote is significant for two reasons. First, he expresses an interest in voting on local issues but cannot because of registration requirements. Many of the students choose not to switch their registration to Baton Rouge because they still want to vote in their hometown elections but regretted not being able to vote in Baton Rouge elections. Second, the student places the blame on himself. Rather than questioning a system which places a heavy burden of registration on the voter (Rosenstone & Wolfinger, 1978), he internalizes the blame saying, "it's my fault."

## Discussion

The “it’s my fault” position is perhaps the most prevalent theme to emerge from these conversations. The ideal of citizenship appears to be so high that not even the most informed or involved have confidence in their abilities as citizens or are satisfied with their civic performance. And rather than blaming the system, these citizens often blamed themselves. In fact, the system was often praised. Students often spoke of the “genius” of the representative system or the foresight of the founding fathers. These students internalize the problems of democratic government. Essentially, many of these students, still in the formative process of developing as citizens, felt they had already failed in the task of citizenship.

Most significantly, these students felt uninformed in a system which prized the informed citizen. With the looming threat of the “tyranny of the majority” these students felt a pressure to be informed but lacked the resources to do it. Openly criticizing both their education and the news media, these students obviously want more information but were often had few sources they trusted.

## CONCLUSION

Moving from the Revolutionary era to the present day, citizens and political elites still clash over the central dichotomy of representation vs. participation. While some want greater civic involvement, others fear the “tyranny of the majority.” Somewhere between these competing camps, though, the ideal of the informed citizen has emerged as the answer to both problems (see Schudson, 1998). Through the informed citizen, advocates of representative democracy are provided with the highly informed decision maker while advocates of a more participatory democracy are given the active involvement of the citizenry. In the end it is Schudson’s (1998) concept of the ideal citizen that prevails as the contemporary ideal of democratic citizenship.

And although Schudson himself rejects the informed citizen in favor of the monitorial citizen<sup>3</sup>, this study shows that the monitorial citizen has not been given the tools he needs to perform his role. The public sphere is clogged with noise and manipulation, preventing these citizens from receiving reliable and accurate information. In addition, these students openly asked for a better education system. Surely the cause of self-government deserves more than a half year of rote memorization.

Feeling this pressure to be highly informed without being given the tools to reach the ideal of information, some citizens simply disengage. Wary of an unthinking public making uniformed decisions, many of the students from the focus groups have internalized the fear of the “tyranny of the majority.” In essence, raising the ideal of citizenship without providing an adequate means to reach that ideal seems to lead to greater disengagement rather than greater participation.

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<sup>3</sup> Rather than play an active role in decision making, the monitorial citizen is instead alerted to problems (Schudson, 1998, p. 310)



In order for this informed citizen to thrive the public sphere must be a realm for the rational exchange of ideas. When strategic communication encroaches on the role of communicative action, the informed citizen loses his ability to reach an informed decision. Unfortunately, the contemporary public sphere is often consumed by strategic communication and the power of political professionals. Lacking a worthwhile civic education with which to fend off the threat of strategic communication, citizens are essentially forced out of the public sphere.

So, if we do hope to reach the ideals of self-government, we must be cognizant of the needs of the citizens. An informed citizen is a good ideal to have, but it cannot be successful without the education of citizens. Fortunately, efforts at civic education do appear to work. When teachers bring the news media into the classroom, students have shown increased levels of news intake and demonstrate better attitudes toward the press (Lopez et al., 2007). And while United States colleges and universities are apparently failing to teach their students the history and function of the United States government, students who go to schools that do require classes in these subjects generally graduate with higher levels of civic knowledge (Intercollegiate Studies Institute's National Civic Literacy Board, 2006). And these higher levels of knowledge appear to coincide with higher levels of political participation, including voting and volunteering (Intercollegiate Studies Institute's National Civic Literacy Board, 2006). With education levels shown to be a significant indicator of voter turnout (Duff et al, 2007; Powell, 1986) and increased political knowledge leading to increased political interest (Patterson, 2002; Putnam, 2000), increasing civic education would likely be a significant boost to the health of contemporary democracy. The key to reform lies in recognizing the real avenues through which citizens can both become better citizens and effectively participate in the political process. If a

democracy is to call itself a democracy, rational, public deliberation must be a key part of that participation.

Unfortunately, citizens, already far removed from the political process, have little room to implement these reforms themselves. Advocates for democracy must make a real push for policy changes aimed at increasing levels of education. Academics and political elites have the access and resources that average citizens do not. Armed with their greater education and their close ties to the political process, political professionals must recognize that they reside in a system which makes them the *representatives* of the public and start working for the public it is meant to represent.

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## APPENDIX A: DEBATE DETAILS

### First Republican Debate

Date: May 3, 2007

Venue: California

Network: MSNBC

Candidates: Sen. Sam Brownback, Former Gov. James Gilmore, Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Former Gov. Mike Huckabee, Rep. Duncan Hunter, Sen. John McCain, Rep. Ron Paul, Former Gov. Mitt Romney, Rep. Tom Tancredo, Former Gov. Tommy Thompson.

Moderators: Chris Matthews, MSNBC, John Harris, Editor in Chief, Politico.com, Jim Vandehei, Executive Editor, Politico.com

### First Democrat Debate

Date: April 26, 2007

Venue: South Carolina

Network: MSNBC

Participating Candidates: Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Former Sen. John Edwards, Gov. Bill Richardson, Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich, Former Sen. Mike Gravel, Sen. Barack Obama

Moderators: Brian Williams, NBC News, David Stanton, WIS News

### New Hampshire Republican Debate

Date: January 5, 2008

Venue: New Hampshire

Network: ABC

Participating Candidates: Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Former Governor Mike Huckabee, Senator John McCain, Representative Ron Paul, Former Governor, Mitt Romney, Rommer Senator Fred Thompson

Moderators: Charles Gibson, ABC News, Scott Spradling, WMUR-TV News

\*Highest rated Republican primary debate

### New Hampshire Democrat Debate

Date: January 5, 2008

Venue: New Hampshire

Network: ABC

Participating Candidates: Senator Hillary Clinton, Senator Barack Obama, Governor Bill Richardson

Moderators: Charles Gibson, ABC News, Scott Spradling, WMUR-TV News

\*Highest rated Republican primary debate

### Last Republican Debate

Date: January 30, 2008

Venue: California

Network: CNN

Participating Candidates: Former Governor Mike Huckabee, Former Senator John McCain, Representative Ron Paul, Former Governor Mitt Romney,

Moderator: Anderson Cooper, CNN



Last (Analyzed) Democrat Debate

Date: February 21, 2008

Venue: Texas

Network: CNN

Participating Candidates: Senator Hillary Clinton, Senator Barack Obama

Moderators: Campbell Brown, CNN, John King, CNN, Jorge Ramos, UNIVISION

## APPENDIX B: PILOT STUDY TOPICS

1. What sources of information do you feel factor in to your political decisions?
  - a. News
  - b. Conversations
  - c. Other Media Sources
  - d. Parties
2. What information do you feel you need as a citizen? Why do you need this information?
  - a. Current Events
  - b. History
  - c. Knowledge of Government
3. Who should be responsible for informing citizens?
  - a. Media
  - b. Education
  - c. Family
  - d. Elected Officials
4. What role does citizenship play in your everyday life?
  - a. Your conversations
  - b. Your job
  - c. Your activities
  - d. Your economics
5. How active are you as a citizen? Why?
  - a. Voting: which elections?
  - b. Volunteering
  - c. Party Participation
  - d. Communicating
  - e. Organizations
  - f. Demonstrating
6. What does the ideal citizen look like? Why?
  - a. Votes
  - b. Volunteers
  - c. Pays attention
  - d. Speaks publicly
  - e. Participate in campaigns
7. How do you think you can participate in the government?
  - a. Be heard
  - b. Make changes
  - c. Enact policy
8. If you do participate in politics, what motivates you to do so?
  - a. Helping others
  - b. Improving government

- c. Personal Interest
  - d. Sense of duty
9. Do you feel that democracy in America is successful?
- a. What should democracy be?
  - b. Do you feel like American's participate enough?
  - c. Do you feel like you have a voice in government?
10. What do you suggest to those who hope to get young people more involved in the political process?

## APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP TOPICS

1. Do you pay attention to political news?
2. Where do you get political information from?
  - a. News
  - b. People
  - c. School
3. What information do you think you need as a citizen?
  - a. Current Events
  - b. History
  - c. Knowledge of Government
4. How important is politics in your life?
5. How important is the government in your life?
6. How active are you as a citizen?
  - a. Voting: which elections?
  - b. Volunteering
  - c. Party Participation
  - d. Communicating
  - e. Organizations
  - f. Demonstrating
7. If you do participate in politics, what motivates you to do so?
  - a. Helping others
  - b. Improving government
  - c. Personal Interest
  - d. Sense of duty
8. Can you define democracy for me?
9. Do you think democracy in America is successful? Why or why not?
10. Do you think the public can influence government? Why or why not?
11. Should the government pay attention to the public? Why or why not?
12. Do you think *you* can influence government? Why or why not?
13. If you wanted to influence the government, how would you go about doing it?
14. Who has the power in the government?
15. Can the people have power in the government? Why or why not?

16. Should people be more involved in politics? Why or why not?

17. How should we get more young people involved in the political process?

## VITA

Katherine Rhodes Knobloch was born in September 1983, to Pam and Smitty Knobloch in Thibodaux, Louisiana. She graduated from Louisiana State University in 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts in mass communication and a specialization in political communication. After graduating, Katie worked as an intern for the Louisiana Public Affairs Research Council, a non-profit, Louisiana state government watchdog group. Following this, Katie chose to attend the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University for her master's program. She expects to graduate in May 2008 with a Master of Mass Communication.

While at the Manship School, Katie specialized in citizenship and civic discourse. Her main research has been on youth civic engagement and the meaning of democratic citizenship. Upon graduation, Katie will attend the doctoral program at the University of Washington in the Department of Communication. There she plans to continue her study of youth engagement and democratic citizenship. Before leaving for Seattle, Katie will marry Aaron Gibson, an English teacher, on June 7, 2008.