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**CONSTRUCTING THE POLITICAL IDENTITY OF GENERATION NEXT: A
FOCUS GROUP STUDY**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts, Communication

By

Ryan Edward Graham

May 2016

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FOCUS GROUP STUDY**

Communication

Missouri State University, May 2016

Master of Arts

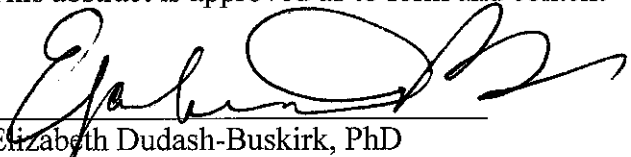
Ryan Edward Graham

ABSTRACT

In the midst of an election season, research in the areas of politics and democratic engagement become increasingly important. Framed by concepts from social constructionism, this study used focus group interviews to better understand salient political values and citizenship norms among America's youth. Through personal experience and reflection, participants in this qualitative study were able to produce meaningful data from which one may draw general conclusions. The three major themes appeared as 1) socialization & development, 2) lack of faith, and 3) expanded notions of citizenship and engagement. Ultimately, results from this study suggested that America's youth have constructed a subjective political reality in which effective political participation is characterized by personal action rather than adherence to an established political system and its respective modes of participation.

KEYWORDS: citizenship, democratic engagement, social constructionism, grounded theory, Millennials

This abstract is approved as to form and content



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By

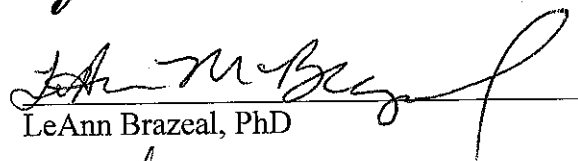
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INTRODUCTION

Every age since the ancient Greeks fashioned an image of being political based upon citizenship (Isin, 2002, p. 1). Today, there are two different narratives competing for validation in the world of politics and democratic engagement. Carpini (2000) argues that democratic engagement has declined over the past 30 years among all age groups. University of California Professor Russell Dalton claims that “A host of political analysts bemoan what is wrong with America and its citizens. Too few of America’s citizens are voting, we are disconnected from our fellow citizens and lacking social capital, we are losing faith in our government, and the nation is in social disarray” (Dalton, 2016, p.2).

Carpini (2000) states that this decline in democratic engagement is particularly salient among America’s youth. Harvard Professor Robert Putnam suggests that the slow and steady replacement of older, “civic-minded” generations by younger, disaffected generations is the source of this decline and that young people appear to be “dropping out of politics” (Putnam, 2000). The Millennial generation has been denounced by their elders as being particularly politically apathetic. Described as narcissistic, coddled, lazy, and even delusional, this new face of America has been marked as the problem facing American democracy and political participation. At the same time, other experts harbor a more positive view of our nation’s youth.

Dalton (2016) argued in opposition to the negative views of Millennials regarding citizenship and participation in his work, “The Good Citizen”. Dalton claims that young people are reshaping American politics by redefining civic participation through an expanded repertoire of political action (Dalton, 2016). Put another way, young

people are not any less engaged, they just choose to engage in different ways than their parents. And because the rubric used by many experts to evaluate participation and engagement has not changed with the times, Dalton (2016) claims that these negative evaluations of America's youth are more hyperbolic than truthful.

Still, the debate continues and the definitive characteristics of being a good citizen in America today remain in question. In the midst of a new election with a particularly interesting array of candidates, the 2016 election season provides a wildly unique opportunity to explore this quandary of Millennials and political engagement. In doing this, a new questions surfaces: how do you study citizenship and engagement norms? Skocpol and Fiorina (1999) maintain that there are three different approaches for the study of civic engagement: The social capital perspective, the rational choice perspective, and the historical-institutionalism perspective. However, McKinney, Kaid, and Bystrom (2005) have suggested a fourth method of studying civic engagement focused on the examination of communication acts.

The approach used by McKinney and his colleagues calls for communicative analysis, investigating conversations among citizens about their political and civic values. Essentially, McKinney and his colleges believe that conversations about politics guide citizens' attitudes and ultimately their behavior. These attitudes and behaviors illuminated through communicative analysis provide a unique window from which to view a group's perceptions of the current political climate, their notions of citizenship, engagement, and sense of political identity.

Because much of the published research on Millennials is quantitative in nature, this communicatively situated method offers a new perspective from which to approach

political Millennial studies. In light of research identifying the “*whats*” of Millennial studies; that is, the larger trends in political attitudes among today’s youth, it is a logical next step to inquire as to *why* Millennials may feel the way they do. In an effort to better understand the political values and citizenship norms of America’s youth, the current study employs social constructionism as a conceptual canvas from which this communicative approach may be understood.

The theory of Social Constructionism exists as an extension of Interpretivist scholarship and operates on the basic premise that human beings do not discover knowledge so much as they make it. Within the context of this study, a constructivist perspective suggests that through conversation, individuals create their own sense of political reality and its salient components. Experts Berger and Luckmann (1991) claim that conversation constitutes the single most important means of building and maintaining subjective reality. This subjective reality might be easier understood as the product of unique human experiences from which individuals acquire their general sense of how things are.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that under the rubric of social constructionism, the meaning of any given social action (verbal speech or non-verbal communication) is dependent upon the specific social cluster in which it takes place. As an abstract context, politics exists as one of the specific clusters of social frameworks described by Berger and Luckmann (1966), governed by its own set of concepts, models, and schemas layered over a sociocultural backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth (Schwandt, 2000). For the social constructionist then, the fabric of political reality is created through communicative action.

From this communicative standpoint, one can see how the underpinnings of social constructionism function to implicate young citizens' political "talk" to a general sense of their political and civic identity. "How individuals see themselves in the political process depends on how they construct themselves in that process through their language" (Dudash, 2007, p. 11). It is the aim of this project to utilize Social Constructionism as an approach for exploring Millennials' notions of political participation, engagement, and political identity. Upon examination of the focus group transcripts, three themes emerged as prominent by way of frequency and intensity in Millennials' conversations about politics and citizenship. These themes appeared as *socialization and development*, *lack of faith*, and *expanded notions of citizenship & Engagement*.

As the amount of research increases on this subject, the current study may prove to be both practically and theoretically useful. Specifically, it may be illustrative of an extension of social construction theory as it relates to the study of political discourse. Additionally, the current study extends the use of grounded theory in political research, as well as provides valuable insight into the pragmatism of qualitative data as it is applied to political studies. This chapter concludes with this justification for the current study. Chapter Two is a review of relevant literature focused on the Millennial generation, citizenship and engagement, and paradigms of qualitative inquiry. Chapter Three is an explanation of the method used for data collection and analysis in this study. Finally, chapters Four and Five include a presentation of the data, a discussion of the findings, recognition of the study's limitations, and a conclusion which overviews the study and its implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What follows is a review of relevant literature on Millennials, citizenship and engagement, and qualitative inquiry. Specifically, this review will explore existing research on Millennials and politics, varying measures of citizenship, as well as three major paradigms within which qualitative research may be conducted. Following the review of qualitative paradigms, the concept of social constructionism will be further explicated as the theoretical lens for the current study.

Demographics & Social Trends

The Millennial generation is forging a unique path to adulthood. This new face of America is racially diverse, well educated, and despite the current state of the U.S. economy, fiscally optimistic (Pew Research Center, 2010). Socially, Millennials exhibit liberal tendencies, harboring progressive views on many social issues. Additionally, Millennials exhibit an evident disassociation with party politics, but tend to vote democratically (Pew Research Center, 2014). What follows is a review of literature examining demographic and developmental trends that characterize this new generation.

Although the exact birth year of Millennials is very debatable (Agozzino, 2012, p. 184), for the current study, those who were born after the year 1982 were defined as Millennials. This particular year was chosen because it was the year selected by experts Howe and Strauss (2000), who “have done extensive studies on this generation and are said to have coined the term ‘Millennial’” (Agozzino, 2012, p. 184).

Ethnically, the Millennial generation is more diverse than any generation in American history. A study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2010 concluded that roughly six in ten individuals belonging to the Millennial generation were non-Hispanic whites. This does not differ significantly from Gen Xers whose non-Hispanic white population hovers roughly around 62%. However, this number does appear to be in significant contrast with older generations such as Baby Boomers and Silents, who's non-Hispanic white populations stack up at 73 and 80 percent respectively (Pew Research Center, 2010).

With regards to nativity, studies have shown that 11% of children born in the U.S. are children of at least one immigrant parent – a heavier number than that of Gen Xers and Baby Boomers which appear at approximately 7 and 5 percent respectively (Pew Research Center, 2010). Although these numbers are not precise, they certainly help to paint an interesting picture of the Millennial generation as a whole. In addition to their ethnic diversity, Millennials are also unique in their educational trajectory and role in America's work force.

Millennials are attending and graduating from college at a higher rate than previous generations. Today's youth are on track to becoming the most educated generation in the history of the United States (Pew Research Center, 2014); and due to the demands of the modern skills-based economy, characterized by an increasing demand for more highly skilled workers (OECD, 1996), one could assume that these numbers will continue to rise.

Pew Research Center (2014) suggests that, "Social trends and economic forces help explain the difference in labor force patterns between the Millennials and earlier

generations” (p.10). Millennials are considered less likely to be employed than Gen Xers and Boomers were at a young age. Research has suggested that this may be due to the less than favorable conditions that characterize the modern economy (Pew Research Center, 2010). Also, Millennials are more likely to be in college, and thus, it seems sensible that they are somewhat less likely to be a part of the labor force (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Another angle of educational analysis reveals that Millennial women are more likely to best Millennial men in college attendance and graduation. This trend may be partially due to a higher number of women in older generations having been stay-at-home mothers in early adulthood. However, due to their coming of age after a major recession, in combination with record setting levels of student debt, young adults have been slow to marry and therefore, stay-at-home parents are not as prevalent among Millennials (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Presumably less flattering than their reputation for being well educated and ethnically diverse, America’s youth have also been labeled as politically apathetic by many experts. Carpini (2000) suggests that today’s young adults are less interested in the substance or process of politics, the act of voting, and have generally disassociated themselves from the entire political system. However, other experts are more positive and describe, “a younger generation that is politically engaged, albeit in different ways than their elders” (Dalton, 2016, p. 3). These two competing views frame the following, more extensive discussion of politics, democratic engagement, and America’s youth.

Millennials and Politics

Childers (2012) states, “It has almost become taken for granted that America’s young people have fallen behind in the realm of political participation” (p. 10).

Researchers consistently show that young people “do not participate politically at levels close to older Americans or at levels comparable to earlier generations of American youth” (Childers, 2012, p. 10). Despite this apparent lack of political enthusiasm, in the most recent presidential elections Millennials crashed the voting booths at a much higher rate than is usual for young Americans.

“The Percentage of young adults who turned out to vote jumped from 40% in the 2000 election to 49% in 2004, while turnout among older adults rose only 3 percentage points, to 68%.” (Pew Research Center, 2010, p.81). Although older adults have remained the dominant demographic at the voting booths, one would be remiss to overlook a 9% increase in a single election cycle. What is more, the increase among Millennial voting participation did not stop in 2004. In 2008, the voter turnout among young people rose yet again, climbing to 51%. These numbers represent the smallest voting gap between older and younger voters since 1972; the first year that citizens were guaranteed the right to vote at age 18 (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Millennials were among Barack Obama’s strongest supporters in 2008 voting overwhelmingly democratic. In fact, Childers (2012) suggests that, “...they were, in large part, responsible for Obama’s victory” (p. 2). This young adult voting group represented approximately 70 percent of the margin of difference between Obama and McCain (Carpenter, 2012). Millennials backed Obama for president by more than a two-to-one ratio (66% to 32%) while older adults were giving just 50% of their votes to the

democratic nominee” (p. 4) These numbers are evident of the largest voting disparity between younger and older voters within the past four decades (Pew Research Center, 2010). And because last year Millennials overtook Boomers as the largest living generation, their voting tendencies will become increasingly important to future presidential hopefuls (Fry, 2015).

In general, Millennials appear to be much more liberal than previous generations. A nation-wide set of interviews with Millennials in 2009 found that they have consistently identified more closely with the Democratic Party (37%) than with the Republican Party (22%) (Pew Research Center, 2010). Perhaps what is more interesting in regards to the youth’s relationship to political parties is the number of Millennials who identify as being politically independent.

Roughly 50% of Millennials chose not to identify with either major political party and claim an independent political orientation (Pew Research Center, 2014). It should be noted however, that although a significant amount of Millennials may self-identify as being independent, within two-party system of American politics, the majority of Millennial Independents still lean sharply to the left (Pew Research Center, 2010). Roughly 20% of Millennial independents claimed to lean toward the Democratic Party, while only 13% leaned towards the Republican Party. When these numbers are combined with initial partisan statistics, researchers find roughly 57% of Millennial voters are partial to the Democratic Party (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Despite their participation in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, research still shows that whether compared with older Americans or younger Americans through out history, today’s youth are significantly less likely to vote (Carpini, 2000). Putman

(2000) states that many explanations have been offered to make sense of this phenomenon: “a growing distrust of government, declining party mobilization, fraying social bonds, political dealignment, and many more” (p. 398). Particularly, Carpini (2000) claims that America’s youth are less knowledgeable with respect to the substance of politics, less interested in public affairs, and less likely to watch the news. And because, “people – young and old – chose to become engaged in public life when they have the motivation, opportunity, and ability to do so” (Carpini, 2000), it seems sensible that young people’s participation levels are lower than most.

Knowledge: A Prerequisite for Participation

Putnam (2000) maintains, “Political knowledge and interest in public affairs are critical preconditions for more active forms of involvement” (p. 445). Put another way, “If you don’t know the rules of the game and the players and don’t care about the outcome, you’re unlikely to trying playing yourself” (p.445). The problem, as experts such as Putman believe, is that the young people have little interest, and even less knowledge on the subjects of politics and public affairs. Among individuals in their mid-thirty’s, newspaper readership has declined from two-thirds in 1965 to one-third in 1990. Additionally, television news viewership fell from 52 to 41 percent, effectively reinforcing the idea that young people are politically disaffected (Times Mirror Center, 1990).

Of those youth who do follow the news, the advent of social media, it seems, has significantly impacted their political news environment. A report published by the Pew Research Center (2015) on Millennials and political news states that, “When it comes to

where younger Americans get news about politics and government, social media look[s] to be the local TV of Millennial generation.” (p. 2). Statistically, about 61% of Millennials polled reported that they obtain their political news from Facebook on any given week.

These numbers appear in contrast to statistics collected from the Baby Boomer generation. Despite Boomers’ use of the internet, 60% of Boomers report turning to local TV for their political news. Gen Xers report a rough 50-50 split between internet and television as their primary news; a seemingly appropriate percentage ratio for the generation that bridges the gap between Boomers and Millennials (Pew Research Center, 2015). Although it is true that a higher percentage of Millennials are on Facebook (87%) than any other generation, their tendency to use the site for political information still stands out among older generations.

Even when the scope of analysis is expanded to examine all generations’ Facebook activity, Millennials still report viewing more political content on the site. “Roughly a quarter (24%) of Millennials who use Facebook say at least half of the posts they see on the site relate to government and politics, higher than both Gen Xers (18%) and Baby Boomers (16%) who use the social networking site.” (Pew Research Center, 2015, p. 3-4). Perhaps what is more interesting about this data is how the younger generation’s use of social media may contribute to their unique sense of political socialization and participation opportunities.

Growing up in the digital age, a notable portion of Millennials – roughly one quarter – describe their level of technology use as *the* defining characteristic of their generation (Pew Research Center, 2010). This technology use is present in nearly all

parts of contemporary life, including political media consumption. The advent of Facebook and Twitter have provided an additional outlet by which news organizations may disseminate their information. What's more, the world of digital media has created new forms of online activism that did not previously exist (Dalton, 2016). "Political blogs, social networking, and online political contributions further expand the options for political participation" (Dalton, 2016, p. 62).

Political and Civic Participation

In order to make sense of the political research on the American youth, Childers (2012) suggests that it is necessary to understand democratic engagement as, "comprising both political and civic participation". By political participation, most researchers mean something similar to political scientist Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady's definition, "Activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (Childers, 2012, p. 9).

By this definition, acts of political participation include voting, working on a political campaign, and contacting an elected official. In contrast, civic engagement is defined by political scientists as, "organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others. It includes a wide range of work undertaken alone or in concert with others to effect change" (Childers, 2012, p. 9). Civic engagement often includes activities such as volunteering, membership in fraternal or religious organizations, donating money or goods, participating in charity races, and other forms of direct action (Childers, 2012).

Although these two sides of democratic engagement often overlap, experts find use in distinguishing between the two in order to shed light on how scholars are to measure notions of citizenship (Childers, 2012). Specifically, such distinctions offer some insights into “...what areas America’s youth have been showing signs of atrophy, as well as possible signs renewed strength” (Childers, 2012, p. 9). To investigate this further, one must examine the evolutionary path of citizenship.

The Evolution of Citizenship

Citizenship is a concept with an extensive history in political science. Dalton (2016) claims, “Its genesis can be traced back to debates between Aristotle and Plato over how a citizen of Athens should act.” (p. 22); and that through the ages, the term has taken on multiple meanings. Schudson (1998) argues that in American society there have been four distinct periods, each with its own model of citizenship. As politics have changed in affluent democracies, a number of research projects have been conducted with an aim at examining salient citizenship norms (Dalton, 2016).

Dalton (2016) claims the most authoritative sources are surveys by the International Social Survey Program conducted in 2004 and 2014. These surveys asked about norms representing the four categories of citizenship that emerged from recent research. These norms appear as 1) participation, 2) autonomy – which refers to good citizen being well informed about government, 3) social order, or accepting of state authority, and finally 4) solidarity, or the concern for other citizens of the state.

Although there is philosophical validity to the 4 pronged model of citizenship norms, Dalton (2016) claims that the American public views citizenship in a much more

simplistic way. Answers to the ISSP surveys reflect two broad themes that structure American's thinking about citizenship. The first of these themes is described by Dalton as principles of *citizen-duty*, and implicates the first of two lines of thought on citizenship to be explicated in this review.

Duty-based Citizenship. According to Dalton, Duty-based citizenship, "...reflects primarily traditional notions of republican citizenship as the responsibilities of a citizen-subject." (p. 27). Thus, the "good" citizen pays taxes, follows the law of the government, and contributes to the service of their country through acts such as military service and electoral participation. And because previous studies have indicated that loyalty to the state and electoral participation are linked (Dalton, 2016), Dalton has combined the two to create this reductive view. Dalton justifies this approach stating that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service describes voting as being both a duty, as well as a privilege; "Thus, the clustering of participation and order norms into a single pattern of duty-based citizenship has a strong foundation in prior empirical research and democratic theory" (Dalton, 2016, p. 28).

The apparent decline of these duty-based norms and their consequences have been the main focus of experts (Dalton, 2016). This is because these changes in citizenship norms constitute a shift in previously established patterns of "good citizen" behavior and therefore, are more visible. Due to an increase in the recognition of these issues by political scientists and politicians, studies reveal a heightened level of criticism of the American public (Dalton, 2016).

Emerging as prime targets of this criticism are America's young adults accused of being "increasingly disconnected from their communities and apathetic about politics"

(Childers, 2012, p.8). This argument is grounded on the assumption that earlier in American history, particularly in the 1950's and 1960's, the nation was strong with highly engaged citizens. "Since then, however, the American public sphere has taken a decidedly downward turn, and national community is now in danger of collapsing." (Childers, 2012, p.8).

The concern of political and community collapse is so startling to some, that many experts have declared American Democracy itself to be at risk (Childers, 2012). In their book, "Democracy at Risk", nineteen leading social scientists led by political scientist Stephen Macedo declared:

American democracy is at risk. The risk comes not from some external threat but from disturbing internal trends: an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship. Americans have turned away from politics in large numbers, leaving our civic life impoverished. Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues, and less equally than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity (p. 8).

Childers (2012) suggests that the tone of this passage may be overly dramatic, however this pessimistic view of American youth described by Macedo and his colleagues remains illustrative of the dominant perspective in academic research of this kind. But is America's future really so bleak? Some researchers and specialists have recently begun to argue against these negative positions on America's youth (Childers, 2012) by taking another look at the notion of citizenship.

Engaged Citizenship. The second vein of thought on citizenship offered by Dalton (2016) is a concept he calls *engaged citizenship*. For Dalton, this second face of citizenship takes several forms. Similar to duty-based citizenship, it includes participation. However, participation in the engaged sense, is centered on activities outside

of the act of voting such as, "...being active in civil society groups, and buying products for political or ethical reasons" (p. 28).

This dimension of citizenship also includes a belief that individuals should keep watch on their government and be respectful of different points of view (Dalton, 2016). Additionally, engaged citizens are thought to be morally empathetic and harbor a genuine concern for the community. Dalton suggests that overall, the behavior of a socially engaged citizen is as follows: "one who is aware of others, is willing to act on his or her principles, and is willing to challenge political elites" (p. 28).

It is Dalton's position that engaged citizenship partially overlaps with liberal or communitarian models of citizenship. Rather than viewing political participation as, "primarily a duty to vote", Dalton (2016) claims, "engaged citizenship prompts individuals to be involved in a wider repertoire of activities that give them direct voice in the decisions affecting their lives." (p. 30). With this more expansive view of political and civic participation, the engaged citizen participates in direct-action and elite-challenging activities that transcend the simple act of voting in the next election (Dalton, 2016).

It is important to understand that although Dalton (2016) chooses to organize these two themes of citizenship separately, they are not contradictory. Rather, they reflect different emphases in the role of a democratic citizen. The two aspects of citizenship, duty-based and engaged citizenship, have a long tradition in American politics. However, a great deal has changed in the United States since the end of the twentieth century (Dalton, 2016) and as such, it seems that citizenship norms have changed as well. It is the view of Dalton and others who share his position that greater attention must be afforded

to the elements of engaged citizenship in academic political research and discussions. Dalton maintains that, “integrating both perspectives should produce a more accurate – and more positive – image of democracy in contemporary America” (p. 34).

Reasons for Change

When exploring reasons for social change in a generational study, it is important to firmly establish how social change and generational change are related. Putnam (2000) states that any social change is always produced by a combination of two different processes. “Intra-cohort” and “inter-cohort” change offer two different views on social change in society. Intra-cohort change is centered on the notion of individual change; that is, individuals change their habits or preferences in such a way that the net change within society moves in one direction or another (Klecka, 1971). Putnam (2000) claims that the term intra-cohort is used by social scientists to describe change that is detectable within each age group.

On the other hand, Inter-cohort change is much subtler and takes place over a longer period of time. The premise of inter-cohort change is centered on the concept of social replacement. If different generations have certain tastes or habits that differ from previous generations, the social cycle of birth and death will eventually transform society through a process Klecka (1971) refers to as *social turnover*. Sociologists refer to this type of change as inter-cohort because the change is only detectable across generations (Putnam, 2000). It is here, with these concepts of generational replacement and social turnover that Millennial studies find importance within political research.

It is irrefutable that there has been a change in political engagement and citizenship among the American public within the last several decades. According to the literature, one may accept one of two conclusions: As many scholars believe, and as Putnam (2000) specifically concluded, "...declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life. Like a fever, electoral abstention is even more important as a sign of deeper trouble in the body politic than as a malady itself. It is not just from the voting booth that American are increasingly AWOL" (p. 456). Or, one may accept a less dire conclusion as Dalton (2016) argues, "America is witnessing a change in the nature of citizenship and political participation that is leading to a renaissance of democratic participation – rather than a general decline in participation." (p. 61).

Ultimately, the question of whether America's youth are politically engaged is subject to how "engagement" itself is defined. McKinney, Kaid, and Bystrom (2005) put forward the concept of communicative engagement as an additional approach to the study of engagement. This communicative approach postulates for communicative analysis, investigating conversations among citizens about their political attitudes and values. Essentially, McKinney and his colleges believe that conversations about politics guide citizens' attitudes and ultimately their behavior. These attitudes and behaviors then, in very real sense, construct an individuals sense of political identity and engagement norms.

One way to conduct this type of communicative analysis is through methods of qualitative inquiry. Arnett (2007) states that qualitative research is responsive to communicative activates under investigation, and that learning and innovation in this type

of research are derived from engaging in, rather than imposing on, the communication event at the center of the study. Respectful of McKinney, Kaid, and Bystrom (2005) notion of communicative engagement, qualitative research lends itself well to exploring the nuances of human attitudes and behaviors in a way that investigates deep meaning and knowledge construction.

It is important to recognize that the qualitative tradition is multidimensional and intimately connected with certain philosophical assumptions and world views (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In order to establish a clear theoretical underpinning for the current study, a review of the foundations of qualitative inquiry is needed.

Theoretical Foundations and Philosophical Assumptions

To begin, it is necessary to establish a working definition of qualitative research in which the succeeding discussion may take its hold. In doing this, it is important to understand that the term “qualitative research” spans a wide range of approaches and methods (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), therefore defining it in absolute terms is difficult. Respectful to its complexity, Ritchie and Lewis (2003) claim that many scholars choose to view qualitative inquiry through recognition of some key defining characteristics accepted by a wide community of experts. Broadly, qualitative research is considered to be, “...A naturalistic, interpretive approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (acts, decisions, beliefs, values ect.) within their social worlds” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 3).

Just as there is no singularly accepted way to define qualitative research, there is also no singularly accepted way to carry out a qualitative research study. Ritchie & Lewis

(2003) claim that how a qualitative researcher chooses to conduct their study is dependent upon many factors including, "...their beliefs about the nature of the social world and what can be known about it (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (epistemology), the purpose(s) and goals of the research, the characteristics of the research participants" (p. 1).

The focus of the current study does not merit an ontological discussion beyond establishing the premise that, "...the social world does exist independently of individual subjective understanding...but that it is only accessible to us via the respondents' interpretation", and that the social world occupies a sort of external reality that is diverse and multidimensional (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 19). In regards to epistemology, some social science scholars argue that certain methodological approaches to qualitative research are rooted in particular philosophical beliefs, and that researchers should maintain consistency between those beliefs and their research methods in order to preserve validity (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Specifically, Schwandt (2000) puts forward three primary stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, Philosophical Hermeneutics, and Social Constructionism from which this study acquires its theoretical and philosophical orientation. These three stances share the foundational premise that the nature of knowledge is subject to human interpretation and social context. What follows is an exploration of the three aforementioned epistemological paradigms, as well as justification for the latter of the three as being the most appropriate lens of conceptualization for working in conjunction with grounded theory methodology.

Interpretivism. Interpretivist theory is concerned primarily with human action, and how those actions constitute meaning within a given context. Schwandt (2000) explains the concept: “From an Interpretivist point of view, what distinguishes human (social) action from the movement of physical objects is that the former is inherently meaningful. Thus, to understand a particular social action (e.g., friendship, voting, marrying, teaching), the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute that action (p.191).

What is most important to note here is that meaning is derived primarily from context. Context, in this setting, is best understood as a system of values that dictate the degree of significance and character of any given social action. Thus, understanding the context of a social system is a prerequisite to understanding what a particular social action *means* (Schwandt, 2000).

Interpretivism clashes with Positivism, which assumes that facts and values are distinct, thus making it possible to conduct research that is objective and value free (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Interpretivism assumes it is impossible to obtain data that is “value-free” because, “...The Inquirer uses his or her preconceptions in order to guide the process of inquiry, and furthermore the researcher interacts with the human subjects of inquiry, changing the perceptions of both parties” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 376).

In sum, the Interpretivist assumes that instead of being governed by laws, the social world is fundamentally mediated by human action (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) and therefore, it cannot be studied through positivist perspectives of objectivity and absolute truth. Along the same branch of interpretive knowledge norms, Schwandt (2000)

proposes that Philosophical Hermeneutics offers a drastically different perspective for interpretive understanding.

Philosophical Hermeneutics. For starters, Philosophical Hermeneutics rejects the Interpretivist perspective that “hermeneutics is an art or technique of understanding, the purpose of which is to construct a methodological foundation for the human sciences.” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 194). To accept the principles of Philosophical Hermeneutics is to accept that understanding does not establish grounds for interpretation, but rather that it *is* interpretation (Schwandt, 2000). Schwandt (2000) cites Gadamer’s 1970 work, “On The Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection” where he explains that understanding is not “an isolated activity of human beings but a basic structure of our experience of life. We are always taking something *as* something. That is the primordial givenness of our world orientation, and we cannot reduce it to anything simpler or more immediate (p. 87).

Additionally, Philosophical Hermeneutics adopts a different approach to knowledge-theorizing centered on the notion of there never being a “finally correct” interpretation of a social action (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195). In this way, philosophical hermeneutics views understanding as being negotiated over time rather than discovered or constructed.

Secondly, philosophical hermeneutics argues, similarly to traditional Interpretivism, that complete objectivity is somewhat of an impossibility within the realm of the social sciences. However, Schwandt (2000) suggests that Interpretivism and Philosophical Hermeneutics differ in their view of traditions (cultures, customs, behaviors, biases, prejudices). Philosophical Hermeneutics assumes that a researcher

cannot cast aside traditions during the process of inquiry. This is because one cannot distance themselves from their own traditions as they are too far ahead of the conscious mind. Thus, understanding is not reached by stepping outside of one's preconceptions, rather it is reached by acknowledging them as being an element in the shaping of our interpretations of the object of study (Schwandt, 2000).

Ultimately, philosophical hermeneutics views knowledge construction as being inherently conversational and participatory in nature. Schwandt (2000) asserts that knowledge is something that is produced through dialogue rather than reproduced by interpretation of an interaction. Developing an accurate understanding of meaning is an ongoing process under constant renovation and renewal. Human action is not something that exists in any objective world to be lifted and placed within a certain social context. Rather, human action exists as an element of our world orientation to be shaped and molded through a negotiated process of meaning making.

Social Constructionism. Social constructionism operates on the premise that human beings do not discover knowledge so much as they make it through communicative processes. Berger and Luckmann (1991) argue that conversation constitutes the most important means of building and maintaining subjective reality. Schwandt (2000) maintains that, "In a fairly unremarkable sense, we are all constructionists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge" (p. 197).

Understanding social constructionism is to understand the relationship between personal experience and the formation of knowledge. For the constructionist, the invention of knowledge is not accomplished through the discovery of what is "out there"

in the world. Rather, humans invent schemas, concepts, and models, to make sense of personal experience and construct a personal sense of reality. However, it is important to note that constructionism does not assume there is not a “real world” outside of human social action.

Andrews (2012) explains that constructionism supports the view that, “One can believe that concepts are constructed rather than discovered yet maintain that they correspond to something real in the world” (p. 40). This supports Berger and Luckmann (1991) which argues that society exists as both subjective and objective reality. It is the former, objective reality, that takes importance in this study as it is concerned with how the world is understood rather than the reality of the natural world (Andrews, 2012).

Similar to Philosophical Hermeneutics, Social Constructionism assumes interpretations are continually modified in light of new experiences (Schwandt, 2000). Additionally, Social Constructivism assumes reality is also shaped by a dimension of historical and sociocultural elements that exists as a “backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth.” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). In this, “knowledge is not disinterested, apolitical, and exclusive of affective and embodied aspects of human experience, but is in some sense, ideological, political, and permeated with values.” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 198).

Communication researcher Helen Longino argues that different heuristic approaches to knowledge creation (i.e. sexism, gender ideology) are present in the research process and may dictate the orientation of the hypotheses as well as which hypotheses are chosen to be investigated (Schwandt, 2000). Knowledge construction,

then, is not autonomous or disengaged from a subject but rather, it is contextualized by values and ideology that subtly but significantly impact research endeavors.

This view constitutes a middle ground between objectivism and relativism. Social Constructionism supports the notion of values being influential during the construction of knowledge while also acknowledging objectivity by rejecting the notion that any interpretation of a social action is as valid as another. It is here that context assumes a high level of importance; it is through the filter of context that one is able to abstract a more accurate interpretation of a social action. Social contexts are by nature unique systems; as a theoretical lens that celebrates uniqueness, social constructionism is well suited as a tool for studying human experience and communication within the interweaved contexts of politics, citizenship and democratic engagement.

Constructionism and Grounded Theory. Andrews (2012) argues that social constructionism has been instrumental in the modification of grounded theory – or the construction of theoretical ideas on the basis of empirical data. From a theoretical standpoint, Constructionism represents a more refined conceptual canvas rooted in Interpretivist and hermeneutic philosophies. As such, the epistemological underpinnings of Social Constructionism allow for a thematic exploration of the Millennials and their notions of political participation, engagement, and political identity. As more Millennials cross into adulthood, their opinion on, and role within the realm of American politics will continue to increase. Investigating their political opinions and belief systems is now more important than ever.

The following research questions will be posed as lines of inquiry for the current study:

RQ 1: What themes emerge in a conversation about politics among Millennials?

RQ 2: What does participants' talk suggest about their notion of political engagement?

RQ 3: What do participants' conversations about politics suggest about the political identity of the Millennial generation?

RQ 4: What do participants' political conversations suggest about their political values?

This chapter concludes with a preview of Chapter three which outlines the methodology for exploring these research questions. Specifically, chapter three highlights the nature of data collection and analysis for the current study, and provides an explanation of grounded theory as a means of answering the research questions. Additionally, specific information regarding participants, sampling, and standards of rigor will also be reviewed.

METHODS

The current project is a qualitative focus group study employing grounded theory as a methodological approach to data analysis. The term “grounded theory” is commonly understood as being a methodology in which knowledge or theory is derived from data. Social constructionism has also been utilized as a conceptual framework by which data analysis and creation will be meaningfully understood.

Charmaz (2006, 2009) maintains that, “grounded theory begins with inductive analyses of data but moves beyond induction to create an imaginative interpretation of studied life...we engage in imaginative thinking about intriguing findings and then return to the field to check our conjectures” (p. 137-38). Creating an interpretation of studied life was precisely the aim of this research project. In particular, this study focused on developing a stronger conceptualization of Millennials and their notions of political and civic engagement as indicators of political identity formulation.

Data Collection

Three Semi-structured focus group interviews were the chosen approach for data collection during this project. This method was chosen because it allows the researcher to place an appropriate emphasis on communication between participants to generate pertinent information. Additionally, the method was selected for its high level of flexibility to investigate unexpected issues and to make use of the interaction that took place between group members (Ketelaar, Faber, Westert, Elwyn, Braspenning, 2014).

The participants were encouraged to speak openly, ask questions, as well as exchange views and experiences on the subjects of politics and citizenship. Using an open dialogue format, the current study fostered natural conversation and celebrated the uniqueness of participant responses, ultimately aiming at abstracting deep meaning from participant interaction (Tracy, 2013).

Participants and Procedures

A group of 22 individuals from a midsized, Midwestern university were asked to participate in a discussion about politics. A total of 20 of the participants between the ages of 18 – 32, the age range designated to the Millennial generation agreed to participate. Two of the participants were above that age bracket, however, their participation did not significantly alter the nature of the other participant's responses. In fact, their contributions provided the opportunity for the Millennials to better understand their own viewpoints in contrast to individuals of older generations. With respect to gender, eleven participants identified as male, eleven identified as female. All participants received extra credit points for a college class they were enrolled in as incentive for their participation. IRB approval was obtained for this project and is available appendix A of this document.

A tentative interview protocol was developed as a means to guide the flow of the focus group interviews. This interview guide was developed and influenced based upon available literature on the qualitative interview process as well as published research on Millennials and politics. Due to the guidelines of its development, the interview protocol

was used to stimulate discussion as participants progressed through the interview process (Tracy, 2013). The interview guide is available in appendix B of this document.

At the beginning of the focus group session, the facilitator explained the aims and methods of the study to the participants. The participants were asked permission by the facilitator to audiotape and transcribe the interview. During the opening portion of the interview, the facilitator attempted to create a safe, non-threatening environment in order to make the participants feel comfortable with sharing their perspectives on the subject of study.

Participants were told to feel free to respond to questions posed by both the facilitator as well as other participants during the course of the interviews. The participants were also asked to be respectful to the responses of others thereby affording each individual the opportunity to meaningfully participate and share their views on questions throughout the interview process.

Upon conclusion of the opening portion of the interview, the facilitator began asking broad, generative questions, which focused on politics in a general sense. As the interview proceeded, the questions posed by the facilitator became increasingly directed. This funneled approach was designed to ease participants naturally into discussing their personal views on American politics, citizenship, and their general sense of political identity. The entire focus group interview process lasted approximately three hours. During that period, the facilitator took notes on participant responses while they made their way through the interview protocol.

Analysis

The audio taped focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word file for storage and further analysis. Analysis was carried out by hand, highlighting key findings within participant responses. These key findings appeared as data fragments, or abstract pieces of meaningful responses that were then organized thematically to reveal core constancies and focal points of conversation appearing throughout the focus group transcripts (Ketelaar et al., 2014).

Data was collected and the interview transcript was read thoroughly in order to reach approximate data saturation. Once the data was thoroughly examined, main themes were extracted. Data fragments appearing in one of the three main themes were grouped together and further explored in order to abstract deep meaning. This secondary analysis was carried out inductively, linking personal experience and perspective to larger social trends. This approach was taken in an effort to explore meaning behind previously published research on Millennials, politics, and citizenship.

Throughout the process of analysis, the theoretical framework of social constructionism was employed as a lens of examination. It was the aim of this analysis to explore how portions of participants' communicative characteristics and personal opinions were connected to their notions of political identity and citizenship norms. Previously identified constructs of social constructionism have been cast over the results of this study in an effort to illuminate key theoretical findings and their relationship to the political identities of the participants.

Statements demonstrating a common sentiment appearing at a high level of frequency were thought to suggest a higher degree of importance. When describing these common sentiments, concrete numbers were avoided in many cases. Rather, terms such

as ‘many’, and ‘most’ were used to describe common trends and opinions (Ketelaar et al., 2014). However, the focus groups are presented in significant detail, with quotations from participant responses being provided as a means of support for each theme. This strategy was implemented in order to provide the reader with a way of checking the data interpretation against his or her own (Ketelaar et al., 2014).

Standards of Rigor

Every effort was made to ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of this study and the data it produced. These efforts include multiple and thorough reads through the transcribed interview data. Multiple sessions of deep meaning abstraction as well as sessions in which data was compared and contrasted. Multiple check-ins with the primary investigator were also employed to make certain that the project was carried out correctly as well as to explore the theoretical and practical trajectory of the study.

RESULTS

The data analysis in this study is organized around three major themes that emerged in conversations among Millennials on the subjects of American politics and citizenship. First, participants' discussion focused heavily on the uniqueness of their *political socialization process*. Second, most participants expressed a general *lack of faith* in the American political establishment as it exists today. And finally, participants advocated for *expanded notions of citizenship and engagement* in order to define "good" citizenship in contemporary American society.

Major Theme One: Socialization and Value Development

Determining how a generation develops political autonomy from their elders requires the weaving together of a complex web of factors, each impacting the others as they shape a generation's sense of political identity. These factors include things such as family influences, perceptions and usage of media, conversations with peers and elders, and educational institutions. Additionally, one must consider unique historical, social, economic, and political elements, all of which function together as a constructive framework for building political identity. Much of the dialogue transcribed for this study was dedicated to the unique socialization process experienced by the participants.

Broadly, participants reported having negative feelings towards the political environment they see today. When asked what they thought of when they heard the word *politics*, participants responded with words such as, "conflict", "confusion", "divisiveness", "corruption", "money", "government", and "something to avoid". These

short responses formed the foundation for subsequent dialogue as the participants discussed their notions of politics, citizenship, and how they have come to believe the things they do.

Formative Context. Perhaps the most important element of this socialization process made evident by the participants is a concept they referred to as their “formative context”. When discussing what makes a generation’s political perspective unique, one participant maintained:

When you look at different generations, especially when you skip a generation like from Millennial and a grandparent perspective, as you get that larger amount of time separation, you’re looking at a larger amount of social, historical, and political, uh, atmosphere differences with which that person [has] grown up and has had their formative context. And so you are coming into this with less, um, cognitive territory shared between those two people (FG3, p. 8).

This contextual barrier is something that many participants perceived to be a problem when having political conversations with elders. From this line of thought, it is reasonable to assume that as new generations grow up and enter a place in their life cycle in which political issues become more salient to them, they comprise the front line of a sort of “political climate change”.

When discussing issues of civility in political conversations between older and younger adults, one participant claimed, “Someone who has been raised in a different generation... has been raised in an entirely different political climate in which their methodology of thinking or...methodology of reasoning out politics was completely viable. Whereas from our perspective as Millennials, that might not be a viable way to look at it anymore (FG3, p.8). An example of this contrast in political climate between generations was given through one participant’s account of his mother’s political upbringing:

She grew up when... it was the Reagan era, and so I think there is a significant amount of cognitive dissonance among that age group because they grew up inspired by Reagan, and you know he won the Republican vote and a significant amount of the democratic vote defected for him. He was this really inspirational figure that people were behind. And then his presidency led into three decades of neo-liberal deregulation, and they said, 'this is going to work', and it was this... period of hope. And [there we were] in 2008 when the economic crisis happened and it didn't work... and so now we are coming up in politics, and I think a lot of our generation is saying we want something different... some kind of anti-establishment thing because they feel the establishment has been lying to them (FG4, p.9).

This model of formative context helps to construct the cognitive foundation for understanding the nature of shifts in ideological preferences and citizenship norms across generations. To outline this claim on the side of the Millennials, one participant cited a host of events he believed played a role in Millennials' political attitudes:

Well, failure of Iraq War is like pretty big, but potentially not unique to this generation because of Vietnam. But also like the economic collapse, or like, 2008, uh, crisis... like failures in the banking industry and like subprime mortgages... kind of instills a distrust in like the systems of capitalism. Also, like, mounting student debt, which is unique to this generation... plays heavily... on like the social consciousness of most of this [Millennial] generation (FG4, p8).

To be sure, these events have fundamentally shaped political attitudes among Millennials and the way they see the world. And because of the time period in which Millennials have crossed over into adulthood, the tools available to help them become actively aware of events such as these have revolutionized the way they learn and communicate about their political environment.

Media Perceptions and Usage. An important subtheme that appeared in conversation among participants centered on their perceptions and usage habits of popular media. One participant expressed frustration with the level of partisanship and perceived dishonesty in popular news sources by stating: "I find myself very interested in politics, but I find it had to get political information from a news source that I really trust.

So while I want to say that I'm politically active and informed, it's like I'm getting information from MSNBC and Fox News, and CNN, who I know have biases, so I don't know how well educated I actually am" (FG1, p.11).

It is very important to note that participants' responses suggest that they *expect* to be lied to when they encounter political news. This notion that much of the political information flowing through various media channels may be false seems to be steadily eroding participants sense of trust in both the media they encounter, as well as the political establishment for which that media organization promotes. What's more, the advent of social media has added yet another layer of complexity to media's role in the political socialization process.

Analysis of participant responses suggests that there are two competing viewpoints for social media's political role in the minds of Millennials. On the one hand, participants claimed that social media platforms such as Facebook and twitter are ill-suited for engaging in political talk. On the other, many participants cited the use of Facebook as a tool for finding political information that they might not have otherwise. As an example for the former, one participant claimed, "The fact that they're [Millennials] are always on Facebook, like you have something trending, you know... and then you see these outlandish stories, and people just read the titles and feel like they can post it. Then that leads to people actually reading the article, then criticizing them, and they get defensive" (FG1, p.6).

The theme of conflict and criticism being at the core of political conversation on social media was something the participants claimed they wanted to avoid. For instance, one participant stated, "Yep, Facebook is the perfect storm of your family members, who

probably have one [political opinion], and then your college friends who probably have a completely different opinion. So its just... I feel like it's a really awful crossfire that I hate walking into" (FG1, p17).

Despite this negative outlook on social media's role in the realm of political conversation, many participants had a more optimistic view on how social media can function in their search for political news and information. For instance, one participant claimed:

I think there is a kind of duality that exists of like the information you get on social media. There's like per-, people offering their personal critiques of politics and their personal viewpoints... But then a lot of social media platforms also allow like linking in outside sources, so so you're looking at like your friend group is a representative sample of a field of thought, but I do think there is soft of an avenue to, like, outside sources through social media as well (FG3, p.26).

This dichotomy in participant opinion suggests that while social media may not contribute to heightened levels of civility in political conversation, there is a significant informative element to Facebook's role in political discourse. Still, when examining big media's impact on Millennial political discourse as a whole, participant responses suggested that there is no escaping the inevitable sense of bias and favoritism that has come to characterize popular news institutions. This reality is a discouraging one for the participants and seemingly contributed to strong feelings of hopelessness and a general lack of faith in the American political establishment.

Major Theme Two: Lack of Faith

The majority of participants expressed a general lack of faith in the American political establishment. This judgment was made on the basis of both frequency and intensity of the concept's appearance throughout the focus group conversations. This lack

of faith seemed to manifest as constituent misrepresentation and political skepticism which foster participant opinions that major political candidates lack genuine concern for American citizens.

Misrepresentation. Many participants claimed that the major political establishments (referring to the Democratic and Republican Parties) do not adequately represent their views on various issues. Participants expressed that the partisan mindset that is so characteristic of today's political environment does not represent the vast majority of their generation. One participant had this to say on the subject of the two-party system:

I think that the two-party system... does have more of a tendency to lend itself ... to a false dichotomy on [political] issues. At that point, you get into like a very 'us' versus 'them' mentality, which is much more polarized, and stigmatized, and stereotype driven, because you have to basically cut out the nuances of issues at that point to create this division within politics... which I think is a very dangerous way to approach it (FG3, p. 38).

The same individual went further to say, "there are very few other things that we interact with as individuals where we say, 'yes, the extremes are the best, and the middle ground sucks' (FG3, p. 38). Participants' language suggested that they value the nuances in political issues, and that high levels political polarization do not allow for the validation, or even recognition of those nuances. Another participant had this to say on the two party system:

When it comes to my relationship with parties, I really, really hate the two party system that we have, and how its becoming... you have to be one or the other... there is no middle. You can't look like your going to give [ideological leeway], otherwise you are seen as weak, and you're voted out (FG1, p. 17).

This practice of marginalizing the moderates is something participants described as being all too common in American politics today. The language of most participants suggested

that they are somewhere in the middle, occupying the ideological space between the far left, and the far right. When given their voting options, participants claimed that the partisan nature of America's political environment never permits a moderate candidate to be seen as viable. One participant explained:

I really just have to go with what matters to me, have to hold my values, which is pretty hard to do and then try and find you know, what's the term for it? The least evil of the group. The lesser of two evils, and then go with that because I don't really feel like either of them represent what I'm thinking. And I don't feel like they really care either about what my viewpoints are as someone in the middle (FG1, p.18).

And perhaps worse, the participants do not believe that this hyper-polarized mindset is even representative of candidates' personal standpoints. This leads to feelings of skepticism for participants as they attempt to distinguish fact from fiction within the messages of popular political candidates.

Political skepticism. Participants claimed that candidates wear a political mask, disingenuously disguising themselves as the quintessential representative of their political establishment in hopes of generating a constituent following. One participant claiming to be Republican used Hilary Clinton as an example, stating:

I used to really like Hilary Clinton, I think she was great, but now she has liberalized herself so much, that I don't think she stands up there and believes what she says... I don't feel like she is real... I think Colbert hits the nail on the head when he's like, 'well the focus groups told her to say this... It's just like, I don't think you're real. That's why I would vote for Bernie over her because I feel Bernie is more real (FG1, p. 19).

The idea that our nations leaders are "fake" is disheartening to most of the participants and seemly forms the root of much of their skepticism on the American political system. One participant claimed, "I feel like politics has devolved into a sports game" (FG1, p.9). This notion of *sport politics* is an issue for participants because it gives

them the impression that politicians lack genuine concern for the people they are intended to represent.

Participants believe that this political game is one of strategy and deception, moving towards an end goal of power and influence, rather than effective governance.

One participant explained:

The other part of the tragedy is that both sides have vested interests in keeping a controversy going. Like republicans, I don't think they really want to get rid of Obamacare because... they will be able to run on it, forever... And there are issues like that on the democrat side. They don't want to mess with that because they have to have somebody to run against. They will make it look like they're voting against something, but when the rubber meets the road, they let it go, you know (FG1, p.8).

Surely, the act of politicians using public policy as leverage for personal gain fuels the lack of faith in the minds of our nation's youth. And further, it ignites feelings of cynicism and apathy – characteristics commonly used to describe the relationship between politics and young people. Participants described their peers as being apolitical, and in many ways uneducated on a variety of salient issues in today's political environment. With respect to participant responses however, it would be shortsighted to equate a lack of participation to absolute apathy. One participant explained:

I just feel the realistic apathy, um, because... we're not innocent, and we don't, we can't buy into the idealism anymore because we see how it really is. But at the same time... I feel, our peers don't feel like its worth getting invested in. I believe most people have beliefs that they feel strongly about, but its not worth their time because at the end of the day they feel like nothing's going to change anyway (FG1, p.13).

In sum, as one participant put it, "you can't make a difference, so what's the point" (FG1, p.13). This sense of hopelessness, its genesis in misrepresentation and its strength developed from skepticism and perceptions of disingenuous political representatives, stifles the youth's motivation to participate in the political process and forms the bedrock

that participant's general "lack of faith" is built upon. Due to their distrust in the character and structure of the American political establishment, participants expressed a desire for change.

What then, would positive change mean for the participants? To answer this question, one may turn to participants' notions of citizenship and engagement as they are reflective of participant's deeper rooted political values. In general, participants in this study claimed to foster expanded notions of social responsibility and placed heavy value on elements associated with an *engaged* approach to citizenship. Rather than embracing traditional measures of citizenship anchored on the idea of formal obligations, participants cited modes of personal action outside of the traditional political structure as their preferred approach to democratic engagement.

Major Theme Three: Expanded Notions of Citizenship & Engagement

The final prominent theme that emerged from focus group data centers on participant's notions of citizenship and engagement. To stimulate discussion on these two concepts, participants were first asked for their broad opinions on what citizenship meant to them, and more specifically, what they thought it meant to be a "good citizen". As one could expect, a few participants cited things such as paying taxes and stimulating the economy as being significant contributions to citizenship. These things were mentioned presumably in adherence to traditional citizenship norms that "reflect formal obligations, responsibilities, and rights of citizenship as they have been defined in the past" (Childers, 2012, p.4).

One participant even went so far as to say, “To be a good citizen, I don’t think you have to be involved in politics, even yourself. Pay your taxes and put money into the economy. I think that is all it takes to be a good citizen nowadays” (FG4. P 20).

However, this was not the opinion of the majority of participants.

Engaged Citizenship Norms. Most participant responses proposed a much broader notion of good citizenship focused on things such as cultural competence, cooperation, and acting on concerns for the welfare of fellow citizens. One participant even suggested it was problematic to view citizenship through the narrow lens cited in the previous quotation, stating:

I think that is very problematic though because... I think being a good citizen advancing the interests and the safety... of groups other than just your own, and I think if you are just paying your taxes, and just following the law, then I mean, in a round about way you’re doing that, but if you’re not advancing the success of people outside of just your own group... then I don’t think that is [good citizenship] (FG4, p.21).

Other participants expressed similar opinions, claiming that base level citizenship norms – paying taxes, obeying the law, and stimulating the economy – are ill-suited for being the exclusive criteria by which citizenship and engagement should be evaluated. Rather, participants’ language suggested that they believed good citizenship should be defined by an expanded set of standards. For example, one participant explained, “I tend to think being a good citizen is trying to be a good person, uh, caring more about the collective group rather than just your own, individual, you know, mandate, whatever that might be. And I think that there is a certain mentality that goes with that to say, ‘I am going to give up a little bit of money to care about what is going to keep this country okay” (FG4, p.21).

Another participant expressed the idea that raising good citizens as a parent was another way that she viewed her citizenship role to be important in American society. “Teaching them, you know... that takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of money. It takes a lot of energy, and that way my investment. Nobody is really going to see that until they, you know, have grown up...and... are good citizens. My point was I think there are a lot of things we do as good citizens that nobody sees because that is not their slice of life” (FG4, p. 23)

Direct Action and Personal Voice. This idea of advocating for citizenship norms that are often less acknowledged emerged as a sub-theme within the conversation on citizenship. Another participant claimed that in her opinion, good citizenship can be something like volunteering, and that sometimes an activity like that can go largely unnoticed. More specifically, she stated that, “Engage in volunteering, helping people out. I think that is what embodies a good citizen but yet I think those are what’s ignored when it comes to, I guess, the big picture. People who actually genuinely want to give back and make the, the world or America a better place rather than like someone who has the money to go up there and say, ‘I’m running for this. Vote for me.’ You know? (FG3, p.22).

Participant responses suggested that this kind of direct action activity contributes to a phenomenon of strong-ties among citizens. The notion of genuine concern for their fellow citizens that they do not see reflected in the actions of their politicians is something that participants value as an essential element of citizenship. This strong-tie phenomenon, or high degree of personal connection to the cause of advancing their fellow citizens, is something that participants connected to forms of high-risk activism.

One participant stated, “When I think of a good citizen, I think of someone who really is genuinely passionate about giving back, or... giving people who don’t have a voice a voice” (FG3, p. 22). This theme continued as other participants expressed similar views on the subject of giving a voice to those who have been drowned out by the political establishment. One participant asserted:

Yeah, I think that sometimes...like while caring [for] people and educating [people] is like nice, generally, sometimes it does not work and people do not want to listen. And in that case, sometimes you can’t just act in a civil manner because that will not achieve goals. Uh, like sometimes you have to protest. Sometimes you have to exercise, uh, civil disobedience...sometimes you even have to disrupt... to bring light to your movement when people aren’t paying attention to you otherwise (FG4, p. 23).

Some participants suggested that forms of high-risk activism such as protesting are even more political than the simple act of voting. One participant suggested that caring for others, and advocating for the advancement of their fellow citizens can take many forms and that protesting is certainly one of them:

Me as a straight, white male going out and , uh, canvassing for, uh, a piece of legislation that, uh, protects the LGBT community, um, so that is not to make me a hero or anything, it is just that is part of what I am doing as an American citizen to, you know, uh, protect and help and care for other people in my community, and so whether it is going out and canvassing for a piece of legislation or going out, you know... and sitting down with some people to hold a protest sign, I mean it is a big spectrum of caring about people... (FG4, p. 24).

After looking at participant responses as a whole, one may conclude that the standard criteria by which citizenship and engagement have previously been evaluated – duty based citizenship norms – is not an adequate stand alone rubric in the eyes of America’s youth. Data from this study suggests that America’s youth favors the utilization of an expanded repertoire of political action that exists outside of the structure of the American establishment. Participants advocate for a change; they advocate for

reform; they advocate for a revolution, a political establishment reinvented and purged of extreme partisanship, corruption, and divisiveness. They advocate for the reunification of America, and a political system that works for the people of the state.

DISCUSSION

The current study explores American Millennials' perceptions of the current political climate, their notions of engagement, their political values, and what these findings may suggest about the political identity of their generation as a whole. Through personal experience and reflection, participants in this study were able to express their views and produce meaningful data from which one may draw general conclusions. Results from this study suggest that unlike traditional modes of participation that value adherence to the system of American politics, young Americans place a greater value on personal and direct action as a means of democratic engagement. This is presumably due their deep distrust in American systems of government and politics. This distrust, it seems, has strong implications for salient citizenship norms among America's youth.

Participants claimed to feel significantly misrepresented by their elected officials and aspiring presidential hopefuls. At the root of this misrepresentation, participants claimed, is the overly simplistic two-party framework of the American political system. Participants stated that under the rubric of the two party system, common moderate positions are marginalized, extreme polarization is strengthened, and the nuances of political ideology are all but completely diminished. Participants suggested that this fosters a sort of *sport politics* in which elected officials primary concern has become reelection, rather than effective governance. All of this contributes to feelings of frustration among participants, and the idea that the American political machine is broken.

If America's political system is failing them, then how *do* America's youth interact with politics in a way that they find meaningful? The answer to this question can be found in their notions of citizenship and democratic engagement; as these are the idioms connecting the abstract concept of politics to the concrete word of the individual.

In many ways, the major findings in this study reject the opinions of scholars such as Robert Putnam and Stephen Macedo who claim that America's youth are "dropping out of politics". Instead, participant responses support the idea proposed by Dalton (2016) that definitions of "good citizenship" differ across subgroupings of America's public and that, "The young stress alternative norms that encourage a more rights conscious public, a socially engaged public, and a more deliberative image of citizenship" (Dalton, 2016, p. 44). Therefore, while it is widely acknowledged as true that America's youth are politically disengaged, this study indicates that America's youth define engagement in different ways than their elders.

As Childers (2012) explains, the concept of democratic engagement is comprised of both political, as well as civic participation. Results from this study suggest that America's youth place a higher value on the latter. This is presumably due to their lack of faith in establishment-centered methods of political participation such as voting or contacting elected officials. Instead, participants advocated for modes of civic engagement such as volunteering, protesting, and other forms of direct action. Participants' responses suggest that they take a more engaged approach to citizenship and value, "...a wider repertoire of activities that give them direct voice in the decisions affecting their lives" (Dalton, 2016, p. 30).

In sum, participants view effective political participation as personal action rather than adherence to the grand structure of American politics. Because participants are of the opinion that the political system has crashed, all they have left are forms of personal and direct action that exist outside of establishment modes of participation. These alternative forms of engagement appear give America's youth the direct voice and sense of control that traditional modes of political participation cannot.

Theoretical Implications

How individuals build or create a sense of political identity can be explained by the communication theory of social constructionism. As Berger and Luckmann (1991) argue, conversation constitutes the most important means of building and maintaining subjective reality. In this case, it seems America's youth are creating a social world in which they do not feel a strong need to contribute to traditional modes of political participation. Rather, communication among participants in this study suggested that young American's subjective realities place higher values on modes of civic participation.

The youth's fondness for civic engagement is presumably due to the belief that traditional modes of participation are ineffective in attempting to modifying the establishment to accurately reflect their values. Through the lens of social constructionism, one can see that America's youth have created their own political reality in which methods of civic engagement – protesting for moral beliefs, volunteering for an important cause, or in general, “helping people out” – are more important to *their* sense of true democratic engagement which places a high value on personal and direct action.

The idea of formative context becomes relevant at this point in that it shapes individuals sense of reality. Schwandt (2000) claims that constructivism assumes reality is shaped by a dimension of historical and sociocultural elements that exist as a, “backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth” (p. 197). For Millennials, this formative context includes historical occurrences such as failure in Iraq, and failures in the banking industry leading to the recent economic crisis and mounting student debt. Additionally, results suggested that social factors such as dishonest perceptions of government figures and media networks also weigh heavily on the social consciousness of their generation. All of this seems to have curdled their sense of confidence in America’s political establishment and shaped their unique sense of geopolitical reality.

A social constructivist view would argue that Millennials’ sense of experience has shaped their political worlds to reflect a reality permeated with values. The most important of which include concern for the welfare of others, a willingness to act on moral principles, and a willingness to challenge political elites (Dalton, 2016, p. 28). In this reality, the young seem to believe in transcending malfunctioning establishment controlled modes of participation such as voting, and wish to influence their government more directly, utilizing an expanded repertoire of political action.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There are some limitations to a study of this size and scope. First, a larger number of participants would have provided more data, and thus, would have created a larger pool of information from which to reference in addressing research questions. Second,

two of the twenty-two participants in the study were above the designated age limit for Millennials. Although their participation did not significantly alter the nature of participants within the Millennial age range, a study targeting Millennials specifically may be perceived as more reliable without the inclusion of any individuals over the age of 32. Thirdly, as with any study of this kind, the researcher did learn from each group of participants. In this, some light was shed on possible amendments to the interview protocol that may have produced more detailed responses regarding participants' notions of citizenship norms, and their perceived roll in the political process. Still, a qualitative study such as this lends itself to abstracting deep meaning from the minds of participants that is difficult to replicate through surveys or similar quantitative methodology.

There are a number of paths that future research may take in further exploring this subject area. The process of political socialization is a subject that this study did not expand on. A study on this process may allow for a more detailed analysis of Millennial political culture. Studies from the Pew Research Center have shown that when they do vote, Millennials tend to support liberal candidates. Considering the results of this study, one might find use in the investigation of any draw Millennials might have towards a political candidate like Bernie Sanders. Due to their evident distrust in the establishment, an anti-establishment candidate such as Sanders may provide a more detailed set of principles on which Millennials construct their political values. In any case, there is no doubt that further investigation into the political minds of the Millennial generation comprises an essential aspect of contemporary political research.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the political talk of the Millennial generation in an attempt to discover their respective political values, notions of democratic engagement, and general sense of political identity. To this end, this research combined focus group interviews with grounded theory in order to conduct a thematic analysis of participant responses. Results indicated a preference among Millennials for personal and direct action over traditional modes of political participation. Participants' conversations suggested that the Millennial generation places the greatest political value in both transparency of the establishment, as well as being a socially engaged public. As with any generation, the political identity of Millennials is complex and multidimensional. As America's youth continue to age, more research is necessary in assessing their role in the contemporary political environment.

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APPENDECIES

Appendix A. Human Subjects IRB Approval

To: Elizabeth Dudash-Buskirk
Communications

Approval Date: Jan 31, 2016

Expiration Date: Jan 31, 2017

RE: Notice of IRB Approval

Submission Type: Initial

Study #: IRB-FY2016-145

Study Title: Exploring millennials' communication about politics

Decision: Approved

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the period indicated.

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

PI: Elizabeth Dudash-Buskirk

Co-PI:

Primary Contact: Elizabeth Dudash-Buskirk

Other Investigators: Ryan E. Graham

Appendix B. Interview protocol

Thank you for your participation in our focus group research on Millennials and politics. I would like to collect your consent forms before we get started with our discussion. I will take a minute to introduce myself, and then remind you that this conversation will be tape recorded and that if you wish to leave now, you may. Do I have your permission to record?

We will get started now with our focus group discussion. I am most interested in learning about the following topics from your perspective.

Body

Generative Questions

- 1) What do you think of when I say the word politics?
- 2) Do you feel that a typical conversation about politics is civil, or uncivil?
 - a. Follow up – why or why not?
- 3) In your view, what are the major differences/similarities between democrats and republicans in American politics?
- 4) What does the term *independent* mean to you in a political context?
- 5) Describe your level of interest in politics/political issues?
- 6) Do you think that your peers are interested in political issues?
 - a. Why or why not?

Directive Questions

- 1) Would you describe yourself as being politically aware/engaged?
 - a. With respect to citizenship?
- 2) Where do you get your political information?
- 3) How would you describe your relationship with political parties?
 - a. Do you vote based on party affiliation?
 - b. Do you share ideological values with one particular political platform?
 - c. “I am Independent” – what does that mean to you?
- 4) What is your opinion on the two-party system in United States politics?
- 5) Research has shown that your generation is not as interested in party affiliation as previous generations. Describe what you believe is happening to political parties?

Conclusion

Is there anything that you wanted to say that you have not had a chance to say? Is there a question I did not ask that you wish I would have?