

Book Review

Title: *The Internet generation: engaged citizens or political dropouts*. By Milner, Henry (2010). Lebanon NH: University Press of New England. (ISBN 978-1-58465-938-9) (294 pages, including bibliographical references and index).

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This book is about informed political participation on the part of young citizens. Its key question is ‘Does growing up with the Internet foster engaged citizens or political dropouts?’ (page 3). Political participation is understood ‘to encompass a range of activities, that, in one way or another, seek to affect the policies of individuals who are – or wish to be – democratically elected, and of the organizations behind them’ (page 6). Voting (to go and vote, not the party or candidate preference) is seen as the bedrock of informed democratic participation. Political literacy is described as ‘a minimal familiarity with the relevant institutions of decision making, combined with a basic knowledge of the key positions on relevant issues and the political actors holding them, issues that will vary over time and the individual’s vantage point ...’ (page 12). The author says that by incorporating the knowledge dimension he can distinguish political participants from political dropouts.

Potential political dropouts are the focus of the author’s investigation. Political dropouts are ‘young citizens so inattentive to the political world around them that they lack the minimal knowledge needed to distinguish and thus choose among parties or candidates’ (page 24). They ought to be the target of our policy initiatives if we do not want their needs to fall to the bottom of the political agenda. Moreover, ‘as younger generations replace older ones, the increasing proportion of political dropouts threatens the very principle of informed active consent by a majority of citizens which underlies democracy’ (page 25). The author sees a decline in voter turnout in the past sixty years, and this is largely a generational phenomenon. For the most part, young people turn out to vote in smaller numbers than did their parents and grandparents when they were young. Young people in North America and most comparable countries are less attentive to political life, and thus less involved in it, than previous generations.

These observations lead the author to stress the need for informed political participation of the Internet generation. The core challenge is to identify policies that could prevent young people from becoming political dropouts, by helping them to develop political knowledge and the habits of political attentiveness and electoral participation. The perspective is North American, while Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Den-

mark) are given special attention, because the author is well informed about promising projects and experiences in these countries which may serve as guidelines for new initiatives in the USA and Canada (and in other countries, I would add).

The first part of the book describes the decline in voter turnout as largely a generational phenomenon, and presents the macro-societal factors that have contributed to the current generation's political orientations and participation or lack of it. Economic and technological transformations have not changed inequalities but did change the political socialization of young people. Family and neighborhood influences have become less compelling. Other traditional sources of political knowledge – such as TV news and newspapers – have come under increased pressure.

In the second part of the book the author seeks to identify institutional arrangements found in advanced democracies that manage to maintain relatively high levels of informed political participation among young citizens, despite the universal transformations described in the first part. Topics are the voting system (the author prefers proportional representation), the voting age (the author proposes setting this age at sixteen as a pilot project), voter registration (passive voter registration – the eligible citizen is automatically placed on the voters' list – is preferred), and election dates (best is appropriately timed, fixed election dates).

The third part of the book focusses on aspects of education that may influence informed political participation. Schools have an important mission to provide the upcoming generations with political knowledge and attentiveness, since other political socialization agents no longer perform these tasks or to a lesser extent. Two topics receive most attention: volunteer community service and civics classes. One can hardly expect positive outcomes when the community service approach downplays politics. More can be expected from civic education activities outside the classroom and the courses in the classroom. Civic education programmes outside the classroom include participation in activities related to school governance, mock elections, and mock parliaments. From compulsory civic education courses positive effects can be expected if these courses are given as close as possible to the voting age, i.e., near the end of compulsory schooling, if the emphasis is on fostering a long-term habit of attentiveness to public affairs, if the course content is rich in political information and attuned to the communications networks that link members of the Internet generation, and if these courses make optimal use of simulations and online applications such as voting advice applications.

This book is a very rich source of ideas, proposals and references. The author presents many theoretical insights and empirical findings from a large number of publications by himself and others to answer a great variety of highly relevant questions. The key variables in the book are voting, as the dependent variable, and political knowledge and political attentiveness, as the main independent variables. The conceptualizations and operationalisations of these variables differ in quantity and quality; there is quite some information about the difficulties in measuring voting/voting intention and political knowledge, but almost none about 'habits of political attentiveness' measures.

The author considers political knowledge and political attentiveness the two most important factors for voting. In some parts of the book political knowledge is most important – 'political knowledge as key' (page 23) – but in other places the author states that political attentiveness is most important, for example when he writes 'to participate politically

entails, first and foremost, instilling in them the habit of paying attention to public affairs' (page 97). Empirical data about the effect of political knowledge on voting show that politically informed people are more likely to vote than uninformed individuals. The data the autor presents about the effect of political attentiveness on voting are less clear.

Fundamental epistemological, ontological and methodological issues are avoided in the book. There is some attention for the dominant explanatory theories in the field of voting behavior but very limited space is dedicated to political learning theories. Generally, the empirical analyses presented in the book are univariate and bivariate – no multivariate analyses.

I share the author's concern about young people's failure to vote (in countries with a traditionally high turnout). Other forms of political participation, such as signing a petition, buying or not buying products for political reasons, or taking part in a demonstration are no substitutes for voting because the numbers of these so-called unconventional participants are low and not all of them are non-voters. I also share the author's concern about the poor levels of political knowledge. Both variables – voting and political knowledge – show some stability in the post-adolescence years. To a considerable extent voting appears to be habitual. From that perspective it is important that young people do go and vote at the earliest opportunity. Political knowledge reduces the 'costs' of voting. First-time voters should acquire this political knowledge in school, in a compulsory political education course of high quality. The level of knowledge should be high because we know that if we measure political knowledge at two moments in the life of adolescents and young adults most effect on the level of political knowledge at time 2 has the level of that knowledge at time 1.

The book offers many interesting recommendations, such as making use of voting advice applications, playing press conference simulations, and making first-time voting a rite of passage. The text is laced with interesting sweeping statements, for example, 'Voter turnout is still the best thermometer we have to measure the health of the body politic' (page 78), 'Good citizens need to learn that democracy is messy, inefficient, and conflict ridden'(page 11) and 'To have any hope of succeeding, any strategy for dealing with political dropouts must involve the Internet' (page 76). Overall, this book offers the reader much 'food for thought' and deserves the serious attention of anyone who is interested in democratic political education.