MC/POLI 2030  
Civic Engagement, Youth and Media  
Spring 2010  
Dr. Michael Xenos | Dr. Regina Lawrence  
T, Th 12:10-1:30 | 213 Tureaud

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Course Overview

By some accounts, American democracy is experiencing a revival. Increasing voter turnout rates, particularly among young voters, during the 2008 election and unprecedented levels of engagement with the campaign via new media channels like Facebook and YouTube lead to renewed optimism about the prospects for American citizenship in the 21st century. Yet many scholars offer a less optimistic assessment: that American democracy may be in crisis, given decades-long patterns of rising cynicism and sinking levels of interest in and knowledge about politics and public affairs.

This course is designed to introduce students to a wide variety of ideas concerning civic engagement, and to provide students with the understanding and skills necessary to become more effective participants in the social and political processes in which their interests are at stake. In this class, students will consider a range of perspectives on what it means to be a “good citizen,” and develop a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which contemporary young Americans engage in different kinds of civic or political activities and public service. The media (traditional and “new”) are one of our main foci, as we explore the structural, informational, and attitudinal factors that shape people’s ability and willingness to actively engage in civic life. We will consider, for example, the relative value of activities like regularly keeping up with public affairs by reading a newspaper versus producing and sharing one’s own commentary on political issues through the Internet.

This course will offer both an empirical and conceptual backdrop to current problems of citizenship, and also challenge students to examine their own practices of citizenship. Examining pressing current issues of interest to young people, students will identify concrete options for engaging with those issues, and consider the relative merits of various forms that engagement might take. More broadly, as a class we will consider questions concerning whether there really is a “crisis” of youth disengagement in American democracy, and critically analyze the leading policy initiatives for stimulating greater youth involvement in public affairs.


Required Text and Reading Materials


In addition to *Is Voting for Young People?*, a variety of additional required reading materials will be posted to this course’s Moodle site in pdf format.

General Education and Learning Objectives

This course fits within the **Social Sciences** area of general education at LSU. As such, the general education learning objectives relevant to this course are:

- The different levels of association, from friends and family, to economy and polity, even to civilizations of global significance.
- The patterns by which societies organize how people relate not only to each other but to the world around them, ranging from relations to their physical environment to relations to the divine.
- The diversity of cultures, across time and space, as well as universal social characteristics and global networks.
- Patterns of imagined best societies as well as discoveries of unintended consequences.

Course Assignments and Grading

*(percentages in parentheses indicate value toward final grade)*

*Group agenda:* In the first week of class, students will form into three groups that will remain stable throughout the term (except for variations caused by add/drop). The first assignment groups will complete is the creation of an issue agenda that identifies specific areas of interest to young people. Groups will turn these agendas in at the end of class on January 21, and individual members will receive a group grade on the assignment. (5%)

*Agenda action plans:* At the end of the term, groups will submit a revised version of their agenda, this time including concrete plans for how young people can get involved in affecting outcomes related to each issue. (Note: action plans need not be ideological; for example, “getting involved” on global warming might mean identifying ways to support or oppose efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions.) Action plans will be due in class on April 13. (7.5%)

*Models of citizenship paper:* At the conclusion of the first unit, students will turn in a brief paper (3-4 pp.) that will compare and contrast the models of citizenship introduced in the first unit of class, culminating in a reasoned defense of one model (or group of models) as preferable to others. These papers will be due on February 25. (15%)
Debates: Course groups will also correspond to a series of debates on each of the three case study topics in the course (Election 2008, Trust in government, Consumer politics). Each group will be assigned one of the three topics. Specifics will be announced in class, but the general idea is that students will debate whether the outlook for youth engagement is currently positive or negative with respect to the issues raised in each case study. Three distinct assignments are associated with the course debates, all of which will be individually graded. The first is a debate brief: each student will prepare a 1.5-page written brief identifying arguments and evidence supporting the side they are assigned in their debate (10%). Students will also be graded on their individual participation in each debate (5%) and a written evaluation (ballot) on the performance of students in one of the other groups, filled out on the day of the debate (5%). Debate briefs will be due on April 22, the debates themselves will take place in class April 27 through May 4.

Capstone paper: The capstone paper will articulate and defend a thesis on the current state of youth civic engagement more broadly, drawing from course readings, lectures, and the case studies. The capstone paper will be 3 pages in length. Students are expected to include some of the arguments introduced in their debate briefs in this paper, but will also be required to supplement these arguments with others unrelated to their assigned debate topic. These capstone papers will be due in class on May 6. (17.5%)

Exams: There will be two exams in the course. The first will take place on March 25. (15%) The other will take place during the course’s final exam period, Wednesday, May 12 @ 10:00 AM. (20%) Exams will consist of short answer and brief essay questions. Exam 1 will only cover material from Unit 2 (March 2 through March 23). The second exam will be comprehensive.

Where appropriate, more specific descriptions of assignments will be posted to the course’s Moodle site.

Grading: An A-range grade will be given to work that goes substantially beyond the formal requirements of the assignment by showing originality, creativity, and strength of argument, organization, and conception. A B-range grade will be given to work that fulfills the assignment with noticeable, but not thorough, achievement in these areas. Such work might also include flawed reasoning and organization as well as stylistic problems (sentence structure, spelling, vocabulary, use of scholarly conventions, etc.). A C-range grade will be given to work showing genuine effort that largely fulfills the assignment requirements but displays substantial weaknesses in several of the above areas. D work may meet some or all of the minimum requirements of the assignment in a perfunctory fashion, but shows considerable weaknesses in the areas above. An F grade indicates failure to fulfill the assignment.
A summary of assignments and point values (based on 200 total course points) appears below.

Group agendas*                              10 pts.
Action plan on group agenda*                15 pts.
Debate brief                                 20 pts.
Debate performance & critique                20 pts.
Capstone paper                               35 pts.
Models of citizenship paper                  30 pts.
Exam 2                                       30 pts.
Exam 3                                       40 pts.

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Total                                        200 pts.

* Students will receive a common "group grade" for these assignments.

At the end of the course, your total will be converted to a letter grade using the following cut-points: 200-186 = A, 170-185 = B, 154-169 = C, 138-153 = D, 0-137 = F

Additional Course Policies

Class sessions: Students will be expected to arrive in each scheduled class having read all materials assigned for that day and ready to discuss those materials with others. Cell phones must be turned off in class. (For your safety, one of your instructors will keep a phone subscribed to LSU’s emergency text message service available in class at all times.)

Civility: In order to ensure an atmosphere in which all students feel comfortable, it is of the utmost importance that students treat each other with respect. It is inevitable that we will encounter political issues in the course on which not everyone will agree. In fact, one of the goals of this course is to help students develop skills in engaging in civil discussion of such issues. Toward that end, incivility or other behaviors that may discourage individuals from airing reasonable opinions on course content will not be tolerated.

Late work/missed assignments: Late work will not be accepted in this class, nor will student absences be accommodated, unless students provide documentation consistent with LSU’s PS-22 (http://appl003.ocs.lsu.edu/ups.nsf/4d8b193f0753c7e48625714000672ba4/D45654A11F8AC79686256C250062AE4D/SFile/PS+22+revision+8+2007.pdf).

Students with disabilities: Students with disabilities are encouraged to meet with one of the course instructors at the beginning of the term to discuss reasonable accommodations. Information on LSU’s resources for students with disabilities can be found on the Office of Disability Services webpage. http://appl003.lsu.edu/slasc/ods.nsf/index
Class Schedule

Tuesday, January 19: Welcome, introductions and course themes; What is citizen engagement and why is it important?

Readings: Syllabus (on Moodle).


Tuesday, January 26: Case Study #1 – Citizen Engagement in Election 2008.


Readings: Pericles’ Funeral Oration (http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/GREECE/PERICLES.HTM); Apology, Plato( http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html); Schudson, “America’s Ignorant Voters” (on Moodle).

Tuesday, February 2: Ideals of American citizenship from the progressive era to the present.


Thursday, February 4: What “counts” as citizen engagement in contemporary America? The Dutiful Citizen Model


Tuesday, February 9: What “counts” as citizen engagement in contemporary America? The Actualizing Citizen Model

Readings: Dalton, Chs. 1-3 (on Moodle).
Thursday, February 11: Group discussions of possibilities for engagement with course issue agendas through contemporary citizenship models.

Readings: Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen*, chapter 2: “We Don’t Have To Be Saints” (on Moodle).

Tuesday, February 16: NO CLASS – MARDI GRAS HOLIDAY

Thursday, February 18: Case Study #2 – Citizen responses to Hurricane Katrina

Readings: No readings – watch selections from *When the Levees Broke*

Tuesday, February 23: Discuss Case Study #2 in light of various citizenship models.

Readings: No readings – watch selections from *When the Levees Broke*


UNDERSTANDING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Tuesday, March 2: Youth (Dis)engagement in Context: Patterns and Influences on Civic Participation in America.

Readings: Wattenberg, pp. 9-60.

Thursday, March 4: The unique role of young people in American politics; youth attitudes toward politics and public affairs.

Readings: Wattenberg, pp. 61-94.

Tuesday, March 9: Youth politics in an age of new media.

Thursday, March 11: Non-traditional sources of news – young people and political entertainment.


Tuesday, March 16: Case study #3 – International online activism: Darfur, Myanmar, and the Red Campaign.

*Readings:*

Thursday, March 18: Politics for a new generation? Theories of millennials and politics, political consumption, volunteering and service.


Tuesday, March 23: Visits from political officials.

*Readings:*

Thursday, March 25: Exam 2

*Readings:*

IMPROVING/SUSTAINING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Tuesday, March 30: Policy discussion Pt. 1 – what can be done?


Thursday, April 1: Structural and attitudinal barriers to greater civic engagement Pt. 2 (class discussions on the topic of youth participation rates).

*Readings:* No readings – be prepared to discuss and debate policy issues introduced in the preceding session.
Spring break

Tuesday, April 13: Theories and history of civics education in US schools.

Readings:

Thursday, April 15: Problems and prospects – an in depth look at key initiatives in civics education.

Readings:

Tuesday, April 20: Local, regional and national initiatives for youth engagement (Includes group discussion of selected initiatives and websites).

Readings:

Thursday, April 22: Prospects for the future – what might we expect to see in youth politics over the coming years?

Readings:

Tuesday, April 27: Student debates – Case Study #1

Thursday, April 29: Student debates – Case Study #2

Tuesday, May 4: Student debates – Case Study #3

Thursday, May 6: Concluding discussions. (Capstone papers due.)