

Chapter 78

Engaging Young Voters in the Political Process: A Conceptual Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to analyse young voter engagement in modern Western democracies. Why young voters? Young voters are disengaged from the political process. In order to complete the analysis, the author adapts an engagement model from social media marketing. The adapted model consists of three parts: consumption, contribution, and (co) creation of brand related materials. The author hypothesises that each aspect of the model is related to the other and that all three aspects of the model are positively related to loyalty to the political party brand. The aim of this conceptual adaptation is to investigate a new way to re-engage young voters with the political party brand, thereby strengthening one pillar of modern democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Edward Snowden in an interview by Brian Williams on NBC (2019):

WILLIAMS: What do you make of Donald Trump?

SNOWDEN: I think he's actually quite simple to understand. Donald Trump strikes me like nothing so much as a man who has never really known a love that he hasn't had to pay for. And so everything that he does is informed by a kind of transactionalism, I think, and what he's actually looking for is simply for people to like him. Unfortunately, that produces a lot of negative effects.

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Engaging Young Voters in the Political Process

A frenzy of rapid growth and many recent papers has marked recent research on the concept of engagement (Becker, Van Doorn, & Verhoef, 2018; Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, & Carlson, 2017; Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Calder, Isaac, & Malthouse, 2016; Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016; Mishra, 2019). The concept has become prevalent in many disciplines including sociology (Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010), psychology (Huo, Binning, & Molina, 2009), organisation behaviour (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010) and marketing (Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen, 2019). However, one perspective, the political perspective, has received comparatively less attention.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse young voter engagement with the political party brand. Why young voters? Young voters are often characterised as alienated, mistrustful, and disinterested in political systems (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Dermody & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2004; Macnamara, Sakinofsky, & Beattie, 2012). Young voters (18–35 years) are less likely to vote, less likely to get involved in conventional political activities such as joining and supporting political parties, and hold negative attitudes toward the electoral process (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Macnamara, Sakinofsky, & Beattie, 2012). Additionally, young voters are seen as disenchanting with politics, distrustful and cynical of political institutions, and have limited identification with political parties (Dermody & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2004; Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd, & Scullion, 2010). Put another way, many young voters are disengaged from the political process and often feel alienated from it. This has led a variety of scholars (Boonen, Meeusen, & Quintelier, 2014; Fieldhouse, Trammer, & Russel, 2007; Wagner, Johann, & Kritzing, 2012) to call for further research addressing young voter participation and associated confounding variables. The author of this chapter suggests a need to understand the engagement and disengagement patterns of young voters, as this will help provide solutions to young voter disengagement, and allow for the development of long-term strategies to mobilize the young electorate (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Macnamara et al., 2012; Mann & Mayhew, 2015). The author defines engagement behaviourally by adapting a definition from the marketing science institute; engagement in a political context is - behaviours going beyond voting (Marketing Science Institute, 2010, p.4; Pich et al., 2018). The author treats the citizen as a customer because “citizenship is no longer primarily realized in a relation with the state, or in a single public sphere, but in a variety of private, corporate and quasi-public practices from working to shopping” (Rose, 1999, p.166). Here the author argues that across a range of relations with the state, citizens are now taking a more explicitly customer like stance, expecting more benefits, fewer collective goods and demanding more choice in education, health care, and other areas of state services. This is somewhat evident in the recent American presidential elections and the subsequent 2019 Democratic Party debates where Bernie Sanders seemed unable to sell the idea of Medicare for all in the United States, even after pointing out that this model exists in comparable Western democracies, e.g. Australia and the United Kingdom. The idea of choice seems to be a powerful one in the United States. Christiansen and Laegreid (2000) noticed this trend relatively early and proposed a model of the state as a ‘supermarket’, which they see primarily as a provider of services responding to the demands of customers.

Political parties exist to sell their services to voters (Henneberg, 2002; Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005). The citizen consumes the services offered by government and the messages or promises given out by its leaders, e.g. policies, especially at election time. Politicians sell some kind of attractive vision, e.g. Make America Great Again!, or anything whose satisfactions are not immediate but long-term. They sell value laden services that embody a certain promise about the future (O’Shaughnessy, 2001). Marketing in this context is used to form voter attitudes and to influence voters to vote for a particular candidate or party (Cwalina, Falkowski, Newman, & Vercic, 2004). Marketing consists of projecting a belief of the party’s ability to govern. However, there is always some scepticism about services and

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