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Recommendations for Generation Z Civic Engagement on College Campuses

Grace A. Edwards
*University of Akron Williams Honors College, gae16@uakron.edu*

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Recommendations for Generation Z Civic Engagement on College Campuses

Grace Edwards
Department of Political Science

Honors Research Project

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Recommendations for Generation Z Civic Engagement on College Campuses

Colleges and universities provide unique infrastructure that can support civic engagement. To make recommendations on how best to use that infrastructure in order to support civic engagement among Generation Z, often referred to as Gen Z or Zoomers, the combination of a literature review and an analysis of interview responses with experts in the field provides a well-rounded way to approach the subject.

Literature Review

To better understand the environment of Generation Z civic engagement on college campuses, a broader umbrella must first be studied of overall Gen Z civic engagement. Generation Z civic engagement is a niche topic that demands the attention of researchers. Much of Generation Z’s civic activity shares similarities with Millennials’ actions and beliefs. To thoroughly research Gen Z civic engagement, research about Millennials must first be studied.

Running from Office

*Running from Office*, written in 2015, uses a national lens to view Millennial civic engagement when it comes to running for elected office. The authors of this book, Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, wrote this book on the premise that a functioning democracy relies on the next generation’s involvement in public service, specifically as elected officials, since every one in six hundred people in the United States are elected officials. They cite a lack of political ambition as young people’s biggest challenge in getting involved in politics. They write that American gridlock, a broken political system, the 24-hour news cycle, and the digital era all heighten the access that citizens have to the most negative parts of politics. They say that this
reinforces the negative perceptions that people have about politics, and ultimately drives people away. General distrust in government, low confidence in government, and low approval ratings for national government are all statistics that are in a general decline among young Americans. Through surveys from 4,000 young people in high school and college, Lawless and Fox conclude “Our political system turns young people off to the idea of running for office, discourages them from aspiring to be elected leaders, and alienates them from even thinking about a career in politics” (Lawless & Fox, 2015, p. 163).

While Generation Z is not explicitly mentioned in this book, the sample of surveyed individuals included young people in high school and college in 2015. This does not only include younger Millennials, but also must include some older members of Generation Z. Events mentioned earlier, like American gridlock, the 24-hour news cycle, and the digital era, are all things that also affect Generation Z, and have affected Gen Z for a larger percentage of their lives.

*Out of the Running*

Published in 2017, shortly after *Running from Office*, *Out of the Running* draws from the conclusions made earlier in the 2015 publication. *Out of the Running* relies on statistics, quotes, and survey results from graduate students in programs that relate to law and policy, from schools that commonly feed graduates into state and national government positions. In this book written by Shauna L. Shames, Millennials are characterized as being skeptical of large institutions and the government, entrepreneurial, linked together by social media, generally distrustful of individuals, optimistic about the future, and of tending to vote democrat. When this generation thinks about civic engagement, Shames writes that the focus tends to be on volunteerism rather
than running for office and taking action that way (Shames, 2017). Because of this difference in values compared to earlier generations, the reward of running for office is often not higher than the risk involved, so many Millennials are not running for office.

Shauna L. Shames found that the perceptions of running for office were often more important than the reality of running for office. Through the results of her surveys and the tendencies of certain groups, Shames emphasized the higher costs and less benefits for women running for office compared to men, and that those high costs and low benefits were further exacerbated for women of color. Regarding political ambition, Shames wrote “I maintain strongly that political ambition is not something one is born with. I believe instead it is malleable and depends to a large extent on the perceptions people have about the kind of goods and bads they might face if they were to run for office. Not surprisingly, in my qualitative and quantitative evidence from a group of highly ambitious, passionate, and intelligent young people, I found that those who seemed to see higher rewards and lower costs were more likely to want to run. Conversely, those who saw high costs and low benefits from running or serving in office did not (for some very good reasons) want to throw their hats into the ring anytime soon” (Shames, 2017, p. 169).

At the end of Out of the Running, Shames presented a hypothetical situation where everyone decided not to vote on Election Day, or even just certain groups of people decided not to participate. Democracy would fall apart, she concluded. “We should be just as concerned when the political participation in question is running for office rather than voting. Democracy in the context of an extremely diverse population requires a diverse group from which we can draw representatives, but our candidate pools are very skewed by race, gender, class, and age” (Shames, 2017, pp. 168-169).
Generational Gaps in Political Media Use and Civic Engagement

Generational Gaps in Political Media Use and Civic Engagement is a book published in 2021 by Kim Andersen, Jakob Ohme, Camilla Bjarnoe, Mats Joe Bordacconi, Erik Albaek, and Claes de Vreese. The premise of this book requires participation in democracy, which draws from the works of Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill. The authors use a generational perspective to analyze survey data from different age groups of citizens in Denmark. They found that each generation has a different media life history, and that Gen Z’s heightened access to political information through the media allows them new opportunities to participate politically. Two forms of participation emerged from this research: a collectivist form, which would include actions like deliberation and demonstrations; and an individual form, which include actions like crowdfunding and boycotting products (Andersen et al., 2021).

Since this book uses Denmark as a case country for study, these results cannot directly be applied to generational differences in the United States. Both Denmark and the United States are developed, democratic nations, so an argument can be made that those larger themes from the literature, like the general effects of social media and general ways that Gen Z participates politically, can be applied to Generation Z in the United States. “Danish political media consumption is comparable to that of other Western democracies [because] it is a well-functioning democracy with a broad spectrum of participatory activities that citizens can engage in” (Andersen et al., 2021, p. 140).

The Political Voices of Generation Z

Written by Laurie L. Rice and Kenneth W. Moffett in 2022, The Political Voices of Generation Z compares the Gen Z wave of activism to other generations. “The voices of young
activists suggest that the generation coming of political age today responds differently to the challenges they inherit. Instead of responding with resignation or apathy, or waiting on their elders to fix it, they act and believe that they can advance change” (Rice & Moffett, 2022, p.1).

The authors use survey data to compare results on issues like immigration, the #MeToo movement and Kavanaugh hearings, gun violence, and the Black Lives Matter movement. These issues were selected because Gen Z is more likely to know an immigrant, Gen Z has higher rates of sexual assault and will have more time with Supreme Court Justices, Gen Z has higher rates of being killed with a firearm, and Gen Z has higher rates of being killed by police. These issues disproportionately affect young people and are strong incentives to become politically active (Rice & Moffett, 2022). This book also looks at the life cycle and generational perspective in regard to generational differences in political activity. In the surveys, political expression is measured through protests, posts, and constituent letters to officials.

In the survey data and conclusions, Rice and Moffett found that having an opinion about an issue is not enough to inspire civic engagement in young people. When young people act on their opinions by posting or engaging in protests, civic engagement increases compared to young people who do not post about their opinions or go to protests. Each social movement provided different results, but the main conclusion stays true, and posting is a more consistent way to increase civic engagement compared to protesting. To close out the book, the authors wrote “If [Zoomers] can successfully put this energy and enthusiasm for causes that matter to them into the voting booth, too, their voices have the potential to effectively shape public policy for years to come” (Rice & Moffett, 2022, p. 228).
**Fight: How Gen Z is Channeling their Fear and Passion to Save America**

John Della Volpe, the director of polling at the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, published *Fight* in 2021, and his findings in *Fight* come from his experience conducting interviews of Generation Z in research settings. Volpe writes favorably of Gen Z and nicknames them Zoomers in his book. In regard to the previously mentioned generational perspective, Volpe writes that “a values-based ideological gap that divides Americans by year of birth, mostly nonexistent in 2000, is not a driving force in local and national political contests” (Volpe & Hogg, 2021, p. 11). Volpe calls Millennials a “Gen Z prototype,” and believes that the impatience of Zoomers to see what they believe in come true is what sets them apart. The author poses the question, then, of why Gen Z fights.

To answer, John Della Volpe says that Zoomers are united by fear in that the generation has higher rates of depression, stress, and anxiety, compared to other generations, and that that fear will lead to action. Events like Occupy Wall Street, the Trump Presidency, Parkland, the Black Lives Matter movement, and Greta Thunberg’s School Strike for Climate all shape Gen Z and the way they step into action. In September of 2001, the Occupy Wall Street movement inspired changes in consumer politics and boycotts that did not exist before. During the Trump presidency, rates of hate crimes and bullying increased, which affected Generation Z. The events at Parkland and the following March for Our Lives mobilized activists in a new way which emphasized the accessibility of activism, in the way that anyone can go to a protest. Similarly, the murder of George Floyd in 2020 sparked an estimated 12-26 million Americans to march in the following Black Lives Matter protests. Finally, Greta Thunberg’s School Strike for Climate showed the power of activism on a global stage, wrote Volpe. (Volpe & Hogg, 2021). Overall, Volpe believes in the potential of Generation Z to be an extremely politically active generation.
due to their generational traits. The translation to civic and political engagement in higher education, however, must still be made.

**Interview Responses**

Interviews with industry professionals, specifically in higher education, provided a valuable way to collect information about the current state of Generation Z civic engagement. Organizations including the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASC&U) American Democracy Project, the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Conference, North Carolina Civic Engagement, and the National Advisory Board for the Carnegie Classification of Institutes of Higher Education are all represented in these interviews. Qualitative interviews took place in the months of March and April 2024, and interview responses were collected and interpreted here.

**Roles of Organizations**

Today, there exist many different organizations in the civic engagement sphere, and all of them play different roles in the larger ecosystem. Even though it does not explicitly conduct research on higher education, The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is an organization which exists within the higher education sphere at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. According to their website, “CIRCLE is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States” (de Guzman & Medina, 2023, sec. 4). Deputy Director at CIRCLE, Abby Kiesa, described CIRCLE’s role as an anchor organization in the civic education
space. CIRCLE acts as a basic information intermediary which helps people create meaning from data and research, as well as illuminate the inequities that exist in that data and research. This activity allows people to be informed when they create policies and participate in other practices.

“We are not out in the streets mobilizing young people. That’s not our role,” Kiesa said, “I think that one of the ways in which we use the data and research is to help shape media narratives and narratives in the field.” (A. Kiesa, personal correspondence, March 4, 2024). As an anchor organization, Kiesa believes that the work CIRCLE does can help other civic organizations make the argument for why their work is so important, and why that work should continue to be supported and funded.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) established the American Democracy Project (ADP) in 2003. According to the American Democracy Project website, this network of higher education institutions includes over 300 state colleges and universities with national programs and initiatives that “support a well-rounded education rooted in local and global community,” (2023, sec. 4). Cathy Copeland, who works for ADP, compared the organization as an experimentation lab of sorts, where institutions work together and share their best practices connected to civic engagement. Originally, AASCU focused on leadership development with presidents and provosts, but has changed its focus over time to include faculty and staff. Copeland noted that ADP does not work directly with the students themselves and said that “faculty and staff are the main people that we are talking to and working with, and we do it in order to increase student success and because we see a strong correlation between civic engagement and student success” (C. Copeland, personal correspondence, March 27, 2024).

In 2012, ADP decided to host a conference in partnership with the National Association of Student Professionals (NASPA), and they called it the Civic Learning and
Democratic Engagement (CLDE) conference. This conference created a community for those people working on both sides of the higher education civic engagement space, in both student affairs and academic affairs. This new community did not exist before CLDE. Copeland described the CLDE conference as “an opportunity for multiple disciplines to get together, to connect [with] the people who are doing the work on campuses like faculty, staff, students, and administrators,” (C. Copeland, personal correspondence, March 27, 2024). According to NASPA’s home page on their website, “Participants will have opportunities to network and develop their civic-minded thinking and practices through engaging plenary sessions, informative general interest sessions, interactive workshops, and roundtable discussions,” (n.d., para. 3).

National organizations are not the only ones that focus on civic engagement in higher education. According to their website, “North Carolina Campus Engagement (NCCE) cultivates a network of North Carolina colleges and universities to advance the collaborative work of public problem-solving and strengthen democracy through the transformation of people, institutions, and communities” (2024, para. 2). NCCE serves community colleges, four-year public schools, and four-year private schools. The organization focuses on service learning and community-based research at the state level. Executive director of NCCE, Leslie Garvin, says the role of NCCE lies closely with its ability to sustain civic education by creating the infrastructure North Carolina needs. “I would say our uniqueness is that we are place-based; everything that we do is about what needs to happen in North Carolina,” Garvin says, “There’s all these national organizations doing great things. That’s good, but it’s really those of us who are on the ground [who] understand the culture” (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).
Leslie Garvin also serves on the National Advisory Board for the Carnegie Classification of Institutes of Higher Education. The organization releases universal and elective classifications for higher education institutions, which are not awards, but rather “evidence-based documentation of institutional policy and practices,” according to the About page on their website (2024, para. 8). The purpose of the Elective Classification for Community Engagement is for “the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good” (2024, para. 1). Garvin considers the Carnegie Classification to be the premier recognition for campuses involved in civic education and community engagement, and that the role of the organization has shifted to highlight those pedagogies in the eyes of the community (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).

Each organization that an interviewee is involved in exists in a different niche in the ecosystem that is civic education in higher education. Those unique perspectives create diverse responses to the following sections.

Life Cycle Perspective vs Generational Perspective

As referenced earlier in this writing, two differing perspectives arise when viewing the specific differences of political media use between Gen Z and older generations (Andersen et al. 2021). When different executives in the civic engagement sphere were asked about which perspective they prefer, answers varied. CIRCLE’s Abby Kiesa pointed out that events do not exist in a vacuum, and after mentioning a past colleague, said that we should be skeptical of
generational categories “…not because there isn’t some….but because sometimes there are more similarities across one type of experience than in one generation,” (A. Kiesa, personal correspondence, March 4, 2024). Kiesa mentioned the value in pointing out the threads throughout a generation rather than broadly defining a generation by what they have experienced.

Cathy Copeland, affiliated with ADP and the CLDE conference, heard more about the life cycle perspective during her career. In her experience, however, she said “On the other end of the spectrum, [with] the Baby Boomers, I haven’t seen a lot of change. I have not seen the life cycle change that people are insinuating has happened [from] the 1970s until today,” (C. Copeland, personal correspondence, March 27, 2024). NCCE executive director, Leslie Garvin, noted that the creation of the suburbs is one example of the life cycle perspective in Baby Boomers. Overall, however, she preferred the generational perspective. Garvin described the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War as pivotal moments for the Baby Boomers, and mentioned the lack of any such generational events for Generation X. She mentioned the sheer number of generation-shifting events that Generation Z has already lived through, and even said “I have a sense that [the life cycle perspective] is not even going to be an option for Gen Z” (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).

**Motivating Factors for Generation Z**

John Della Volpe, author of *Fight* (Volpe & Hogg, 2021), sits strictly in the generational perspective camp. He included the events of Parkland, the Trump presidency, and the Black Lives Matter movement as motivating factors for Generation Z’s civic engagement. The beginning event where Abby Kiesa believed the roots of Gen Z’s motivation comes from is
“the Bush presidency, because that’s where young people’s much stronger support for Democrats started” (A. Kiesa, personal correspondence, March 4, 2024). Cathy Copeland highlighted differing ideas of democracy between the Trump and Biden administrations as additional motivating factors. Kiesa also included demographic changes as well as the pandemic and ensuing mental health crisis. All three interviewees mentioned the importance of climate change and environmental sustainability, gun rights, and the rapid emergence of new technology like Artificial Intelligence. Leslie Garvin called Gen Z “the most native cohort with technology,” and saw that as one motivating factor and strength of Generation Z ” (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).

**Inhibiting Factors of Generation Z**

While technology is a strength for Generation Z in their ease to manipulate it, all three interviewees hazarded warnings about potential divisions that technology might create. Copeland brought up the fear that technology creates, saying “I think it’s born out of the very correct fear that anything that happens or that you do will be forever immortalized somewhere on the Internet” (C. Copeland, personal correspondence, March 27, 2024). Copeland also mentioned how technology exacerbates the hyperpolarization that exists in politics. Kiesa again stressed the importance of generational threads rather than boxing an entire generation’s worth of people into one camp (A. Kiesa, personal correspondence, March 4, 2024).

Both Garvin and Copeland mentioned the fiscal issues in our current electoral processes and listed them as important barriers to Gen Z involvement in running for office. Garvin said “I think the barriers to engagement, how expensive it is, the dark money, this, that, and the other; I think you have to be old, experienced, wealthy, and really really connected and
or so extreme that people are like oh, this person’s crazy and you know I’m going to support them…I think those two extremes makes it highly unlikely that this group is going to be running for office very much,” (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).

Copeland brought up how the struggle to keep a work life balance might cause Generation Z to be less inclined to run for office, referencing her own 2017 and 2019 primary races. “I was in a unique place,” she said, “because I had just had my second child in 2015 and I was working as an adjunct at the time, and that allowed me flexibility from the workplace…I didn’t have to worry about what my university would say, or if there would be any repercussions.” Copeland went on to talk about how people need to earn money, think about their careers, and plan their lives out in such a way that could prevent someone from having the time to run for office like she did. “When are you going to have children?” she asked, “When are you going to do this? How are you going to keep being in the political or in the professional sphere? How are you going to balance the politics, and how are you going to do that when your family is not around, or you’re disconnected with them? Because we don’t have the same sort of structure that places like Norway or Japan, who are higher on the global democratic scale than us” (C. Copeland, personal correspondence, March 27, 2024).

Garvin, however, broadly warned about the future of Generation Z’s involvement in the civic sphere: “I think [Gen Z civic engagement] will be very unique to anything we’ve seen before. I think either this group is going to be fired up until they’re like 100, or this group is going to be done and let it all fall apart…but it’s certainly going to be something unique generationally” (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).
Generation Z Performance

CIRCLE found that, in 2022, “Gen Z’s voter turnout in 2022 was higher than that of Gen Xers and Millennials when they made up the age 18-24 voting bloc” (Medina, 2023, sec. 1). When asked about the potential of Gen Z’s continued high voter turnout compared to other generations, Leslie Garvin responded with a divided prediction. On one hand, more funding and infrastructure has been implemented and dedicated to youth civic engagement, especially on college campuses, she believes. “It will still be better in terms of it increasing as significantly as it has over the last decade, [but] I think a lot of that goes back [to] the quality of the candidates. The relatability of them for young folks is just not there, and I’m seeing this election in particular as a serious enthusiasm gap” (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).

Cathy Copeland was less sure of her answer than Garvin. Copeland spoke about geographic differences in voter turnout among Generation Z in the 2023 primaries, as well as events like the overturning of Roe v. Wade and the Gaza and Ukraine conflicts that may encourage or discourage voters in this upcoming election. “I also think that a positive and why Gen Z will likely still be a solid voting bloc,” said Copeland, “is because of the greater access [and] ballot availability that a large amount of states have had.” She listed mail-in ballots and same day sign up, same day election as two examples of ways that states are making ballots more available. Conversely, Copeland said that we will be able to expect depressed voter turnout in states that do not have flexibility in their ballot availability. Hesitantly, Copeland also hazarded a warning about potential Election Day incidents and riots that might take over media coverage and instill a fear of going to the polls into people’s minds. (C. Copeland, personal correspondence, March 27, 2024). This would have the potential to decrease in-person voter turnout.
As an employee of CIRCLE, Abby Kiesa brought up recent voter trends for Gen Z. “I think there’s several reasons why the answer has to be [high voter turnout for Gen Z], because 2018 was huge, 2020 was huge, 2022 wasn’t as huge, but it showed a sort of new normal for midterms within Gen Z…you kind of have to see that young people have put issues on the table and insist they be talked about.” Like Copeland, Kiesa mentioned conversations about Gaza as a potential influence on voter turnout. Kiesa also included the Trump presidency as a motivating factor for some young people who might not vote otherwise. “These next eight months,” Kiesa stated, “will tell quite a lot” (A. Kiesa, personal correspondence, March 4, 2024).

### Influence of State Policies and Focuses

Many different types of state policies can affect voting in the higher education sphere. These can look like the implementation of voter ID laws, automatic voter registration, and even anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies. When asked about the effect of these kinds of policies on her work at CIRCLE, Abby Kiesa spoke about the difficulty of doing aggregate research as an organization that studies national statistics. “If you really want to look at a policy within a particular state, you’ve got to get into the voter file data and it’s messy. So, we have not done that a lot, and I feel bad about that.” Advising policymakers, Kiesa says, is one way CIRCLE can work on issues, but CIRCLE does not often endorse legislation (A. Kiesa, personal correspondence, March 4, 2024).

For Cathy Copeland, the shadow of negative state-by-state policies covers voter education. Partners like All In Campus Democracy Challenge and the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition can provide information for voters about how they can get to the polls, based on which state they live in. Issues about things like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI),
Copeland said, are “about reframing the work for what works best for your community.” Getting to the root of what makes people feel anxious about different pieces of legislation makes it easier for the community to come together and find solutions, Copeland believes (C. Copeland, personal correspondence, March 27, 2024).

As the executive director for an organization based in a single state, Leslie Garvin was able to formulate a more detailed response to the effects of those types of policies in North Carolina. The recent implementation of a required voter ID has not yet been linked to any sort of solid verdict regarding voter turnout, Garvin said. “My vision of democracy,” Garvin stated, “is that it is a process of becoming more democratic, letting more people in, creating more access, creating more opportunities. And to me, when you start to constrict that and start to question democratic norms like that, [elections] are not fair…I do think over time, [anti-voter policies] have a chilling effect” (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).

**Recommendations**

By combining the findings in the literature review with recommendations made in the interviews, a more cohesive list of recommendations about how to improve Generation Z civic engagement, specifically in higher education, is found here.

1.) **More research is needed about Gen Z, youth civic engagement, and civic engagement in higher education.**

Throughout the literature review, it became apparent that more research about this specific topic is necessary to advance civic engagement in higher education. Academic literature about Gen Z civic engagement in Denmark is helpful to understand general trends of the generation,
especially through the onset of new types of media (Andersen et al., 2021). John Della Volpe writes about the shared experience of Gen Z using the internet and social media: “It’s not American Zoomers driving this change, or Swedish, French, or Nigerian Zoomers—it’s just Zoomers,” (Volpe & Hogg, 2021, p. 145). But that cannot be a flawless reflection of Gen Z civic engagement in the United States. Varying results about the effectiveness of Gen Z posting on social media and engaging in protests, depending on which events they were posting or protesting about, does not give a solid answer to the future of overall Generation Z civic engagement. As shown in the survey data in *The Political Voices of Generation Z*,

The work of researchers and data analysts at organizations like CIRCLE is invaluable, but more research is needed, especially about noncollege Gen Z civic engagement. “No one pays any attention to young people who are not on college campuses,” Abby Kiesa says, “There’s no sense for what could be done because of the lack of experimentation, so there’s not a ton of successes to uphold and little research,” (A. Kiesa, personal correspondence, March 4, 2024). By expanding the subject matter to include noncollege youth and funding more research towards that broad topic, new strategies can be set in place to make civic engagement a more inclusive space that allows higher accessibility.

1.) **Improvements to the system need to be made so young people can balance running for office while pursuing other goals.**

In *Out of the Running*, author Shauna Shames wrote about how democracy needs low costs and high benefits for young people to be motivated to run for office. To lower costs, Shames wrote,
We could lower the costs of running by putting into place reasonable campaign finance spending limits and public funding schemes, as most other advanced democracies already use. We could overturn *Citizens United* with a constitutional amendment saying corporations are not people and strictly limiting their ability to affect political races. We could give our leaders some leeway in terms of being human, needing time off, making slips of tongue, and so forth, so that those contemplating candidacy did not have to think they would be facing “gotcha” media surveillance 24/7. We could accept that while some people like to argue and speak loudly, others don’t, and often the quiet ones have good things to say too—this would require the louder and more argumentative folks to keep quiet now and then, which would not be a bad thing (they might learn something) (pp. 167-168).

Regarding a possible increase in the rewards for young people running for office, Shames writes about the importance and simplicity of respect and civility in the political sphere. She also mentions the importance of showing young people that politics can truly solve society’s problems (p. 168).

In the interview with ADP Director, Cathy Copeland mentioned her own experience running for office in 2017 and 2019, and how she was in a lucky position to be able to do so. Copeland also brought up the idea of work life balance in the United States, and how “we don’t have the same sort of structure that places like Norway or Japan who are higher on the global democratic scale than us” (personal correspondence, March 27, 2024). Social improvements in the United States could be another way to make it easier for young people to run for office while balancing their life and work.
2.) The network of youth organizations needs to continue being built so that every niche in the ecosystem is filled. Examples include place-based, research-focused, and assessment-based organizations.

When conducting interviews, the importance of each organization’s role within the larger ecosystem of youth civic engagement organizations became clear. The way that different types of organizations approach civic engagement vary, and not one organization’s approach is the correct-or only-way to approach the subject. Directors of state-based organizations like North Carolina Campus Engagement approach civic engagement differently than how organizations like the Carnegie Classification, CIRCLE, and ADP approach civic engagement. Like a lack of research about the Generation Z civic engagement in higher education, consistent infrastructure does not exist at all levels and in all niches in the United States.

For Cathy Copeland, the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement conference was created to bridge the gaps that exist between different organizations in the civic sphere. Because everyone is working towards a common goal, community-building is the outcome of the conference, and different players bring new strategies to the table about how to better improve civic, political, and community engagement (personal correspondence, March 27, 2024).

3.) More, and more diverse young voices need to be brought together through actions like deliberative dialogues and peer-to-peer engagement. This includes those voices who are not yet able to vote and are not in higher education.

The authors in Generational Gaps in Political Media Use say, “Equally important [to participatory democracy], in a well functioning democracy, all parts of the citizenry participate
politically—not only the elderly, but also the youth” (Andersen et al., 2021, p. 5). This can also be applied to different demographics as well.

According to a recent Pew Research Center Survey, compared to previous generations, Generation Z is more racially and ethnically diverse. “A bare majority (52%) are non-Hispanic white—significantly smaller than the share of Millennials who were non-Hispanic white in 2002 (61%). One-in-four Gen Zers are Hispanic, 14% are black, 6% are Asian and 5% are some other race or two or more races” (Parker & Igielnik, 2020, para. 7). In fact, by 2026, the US Census Bureau projects that the majority of Generation Z is expected to be people of color (2023).

When asked about these changing demographics and how civic engagement should be tailored to promote equitable access, Leslie Garvin values a critical pedagogy, which includes service but also discussion about the root causes and structures that exist in the history of America, including things like systemic racism (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024). The example of deliberative dialogues was also supported by Cathy Copeland (personal correspondence, March 27, 2024) and Abby Kiesa (personal correspondence, March 4, 2024).

Abby Kiesa also made sure to include a thought about young people who are not on college campuses, and who do not benefit from the infrastructure that exists there to further civic engagement. More research is required to boost civic engagement among those populations, she believes. Kiesa also brought up young people who are not yet able to vote. “We have this lack of comprehensive or systemic introduction or entry points for young people,” Kiesa said, and then mentioned that the current on-ramp for civic life does not support young people turning 18 (personal correspondence, March 4, 2024).
4.) Every institution of higher education needs to make a strong commitment to instill a
culture of community and civic engagement on campus. Examples include:

a. A commitment to both curricular and co-curricular activities

Institutions of higher education have the structure and leadership positions to easily
institute activities and organizations that exist in both the curricular and co-curricular ecosystems
on-campus. Cathy Copeland gave an example of deliberative dialogues, which are structured
conversations that focus on a specific issue and happen in a positive environment where people
are encouraged to share their thoughts. These dialogues can happen in classes with professors
who facilitate them, or at an evening student org meeting (C. Copeland, personal
correspondence, March 27, 2024).

Authors of Running from Office went so far as to recommend linking political aptitude to
college admissions before students even get the chance to participate in both curricular and co-
curricular activities. If high school students are not politically aware, then authors Lawless and
Fox believe that they should not be welcomed onto a college campus. “We should be clear that in
no way do we mean to suggest that some people should not be able to go to college” they write,
“We want to ensure that politics and current events are important for pursuing higher education
so that high school students cannot choose to be tuned out…This could be in the form of a new
component to the SAT or other entrance exam, an additional exam that focuses on politics and
citizenship, or an essay devoted to world affairs and politics...In Oklahoma and Arizona, for
example, only about 3 percent of high school students would pass a US citizenship test. The
time, therefore, might be particularly ripe to revisit the idea” (Lawless & Fox, 2015, pp.153-
154).
b. Creation of action plans to stay accountable.

For Cathy Copeland, leaders must focus on their needs in order to increase the capacity of democracy building on their campus. This could be through self-assessments and overall organization, perhaps through something like an action plan, which Leslie Garvin specifically mentioned the strengths of. In Garvin’s experience, having a campus-based coalition that sustains the civics work on campuses, strongly benefit from having an action plan. The accountability that action plans create is necessary in maintaining this work (L. Garvin, personal correspondence, April 1, 2024).

c. Stronger strategies to practice democracy in a way that will tie action to voting, through actions like service learning, because education is not enough by itself.

In *Generational Gaps in Political Media Use*, the authors write about the importance of participation in democracy. “Participatory democracy considers citizens’ active participation not only a means to obtain authoritative decisions for society but also a goal in itself: besides influencing political decisions, popular participation has an educational function in that it teaches citizens how to take part in public debate, how to form opinions on societal problems, and how to solve conflicts on mutual matters, thus turning them into politically competent citizens” (Andersen et al., 2021, p. 4).

In *Fight*, John Della Volpe wrote a laundry list of tactics to bridge the divide between community and political service, which so often exists. First, the process must be demystified and made more effective. Second, students must be shown that politics is effective using real-life examples. Third, Volpe wrote that incentives must be provided. “Creating partnerships between
state or local governments and universities that enable students to participate in public service activities for academic credit (95 percent effectiveness rating) and forgiving loans or providing signing bonuses to graduates who commit to government work (88 percent effective) both receive significant support from survey respondents.” Fourth, candidates need to reach out to young people and show that they care about the issues that young people care about (Volpe & Hogg, 2021, pp. 115-116).

As mentioned before, all three interviewees (Copeland, Garvin, and Kiesa) supported the inclusion of activities like service learning and facilitated deliberation as ways to build a strong foundation of civic education and to promote civic engagement for young people (personal correspondence, March-April, 2024).

d. An intentional focus on sustaining this work.

Cathy Copeland’s advice is as follows: “When you’re talking about co-curricular opportunities, and curricular collaborations that use deliberative dialogues- to have as many different topics as possible to bring people into those conversations is important, but also to realize that it’s not just a one and done thing, you have to consistently do it and train people and then to have strategy behind what you’re really planning your civic engagement influence to be” (C. Copeland, personal correspondence, March 27, 2024).

Conclusion

The method of pairing literature with interview responses creates a unique perspective through which to view civic engagement in higher education among Generation Z. By relying on the existing research about adjacent topics, similarities can be drawn to Gen Z civic engagement
in higher education. Trends that affect Millennials, like the general distrust of people and government (Lawless & Fox, 2015), with a focus on volunteerism over other forms of civic engagement better tied to civic success (Shames, 2017), also affect Zoomers since the generations are similar in age. Overarching trends that Gen Z follow in other countries apply to their participation in the United States (Andersen et al., 2021). Actions that inform and improve Generation Z civic involvement, from *The Political Voices of Generation Z* can be easily applied in the higher education world (Rice & Moffett, 2022), as well as the positive traits of Gen Z written about by John Della Volpe (Volpe & Hogg, 2021).

To supplement the information gained in the literature review, interview responses were recorded with experts in the field of civic engagement. Those interviews were great ways to gain multiple perspectives from individuals in leadership positions. By pairing together the information learned from the literature with the knowledge and wisdom of the civic engagement experts, recommendations about how to improve civic engagement were crafted. If those recommendations can be taken seriously by those individuals with the leadership positions to create change on college campuses around the United States, the future of sustained Generation Z civic engagement will never be in question.

*NOTE* Transcripts of all interviews mentioned in this research paper are available upon request.
References


https://www.naspa.org/events/2024-civic-learning-and-democratic-engagement-meeting


