“Kids These Days: Supply and Demand for Youth Online Political Engagement”*

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Jennifer Earl
School of Sociology
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85750

Thomas Elliott
School of Sociology
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85750

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It is hard to remember the heyday of the 1960s protest cycle without picturing young people, including high school and college-aged activists, as integral to that picture. Whether it was college students and young teachers and clergy joining Freedom Summer (McAdam 1988), students from traditionally black colleges participating in sit-ins (Andrews and Biggs 2006, McAdam 1982, Morris 1981), the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley (Klatch 1999), or key players in the radical anti-war movement and New Left (Gitlin 1980), young people were integral to the 1960s protest cycle. There are also theoretical artifacts illustrating the pivotal role of youth in this protest cycle. For instance, the enduring attention to biographical availability in micro-mobilization processes owes to the hypothesis that young people participate more than other demographic groups because they have more discretionary time and fewer commitments that compete against activism (Caren, Ghoshal and Ribas 2011, Schussman and Soule 2005, Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson 1980). Likewise, most of what we know about the long-term biographical consequences of activism comes from studying differences between people who participated in the 1960s protest cycle when they were young, or specific campaigns within it, versus those that did not (Giugni 2008, Giugni 2004, McAdam 1988, McAdam 1989).

While there are certainly young faces associated with activism today—whether that be young African-American men and women participating in the Black Lives Matter movement, young women participating in anti-sexual assault/Title IX advocacy on college campuses, Dreamers as part of the immigration reform movement, young Occupy participants, or young Middle Eastern participants in the Arab Spring—there is still a general sense among many scholars and activists that today’s young people are not as engaged, or as integral, to movements
as they once were. This impression exists despite evidence suggesting that youth may have traded-off some of their institutional political participation in favor of greater protest participation (Dalton 2009).

In fact, young people are commonly lampooned as not understanding what “real” activism takes and being sidelined from activism by social media in general, or at least activism that “counts.” Consider Malcolm Gladwell’s well known, “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted” (Gladwell 2010). In it, Gladwell extols the virtues of 1960s college activists while bemoaning the current, lost generation who misunderstands how to make anything other than “small change.” Morozov (2011a, 2011b) shares Gladwell’s skepticism and his concern that so-called “slacktivism” lures youth away from more substantial activism. Many more academic treatments include similar indictments about online forms of activism (e.g., Diani 2000, Karpf 2012, Tarrow 1998, Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010), which are generally seen as disproportionately interesting to the “Facebook generation” (see Earl forthcoming for a critique of arguments about "slacktivism").

If, as these arguments imply, youth are in fact less integral to movements today, this should be terribly troubling for social movement scholars and activists alike. For movements to thrive across time, they need new participants joining the ranks as older members are pulled away by competing obligations or disengage for other reasons. Indeed, a marked decline in youth participation that owes to some irremediable lack of interest or motivation on the part of youth would have immense negative consequences for the future of activism.

Stepping back, though, we see a parallel between claims about the relative disengagement from youth in “real” activism today and concerns that have been raised more generally about the level of civic and institutional political engagement among youth (e.g., Putnam 2000). Just as
those concerns about civic and institutional political engagement have been challenged along a range of dimensions, in this paper we challenge the parallel claims about changes in the centrality of youth in activism. Most pointedly, we turn the question of youth participation on its head, reminding readers that it is non-participation (not participation) that is the norm across all age groups. As the large literature on micro-mobilization suggests, non-participation is overdetermined; it is explaining why people do participate that is difficult.

Thus, we ask how movements are attempting to engage youth; perhaps scholars and pundits should not assume that perceived mobilization problems start with youth, but rather with movements themselves. Using a representative sample of online spaces from 20 different issue areas drawn in 2010, we show that social movements themselves are not doing much to connect with youth, or provide explicit invitations and entry points for youth to engage in movements (at least online). This suggests that even if one were far more optimistic about the potential or actual role of youth in contemporary movements, these youth would be engaging despite a lack of entry points, not because of ample welcome.

Skeptics, though, may downplay a lack of entry points, seeing this dearth as a result, not a cause, of youth disengagement. Therefore, we draw on survey data from a 2011 nationally representative sample of American youth to show that there is substantial demand for many different kinds of political engagement among youth. We argue that this attention to what opportunities are offered to youth can forward discussion not just in understanding the relationship between youth and activism today, but also in the larger debate about youth political engagement more broadly.

**Understanding the Supply Side of Social Movement Engagement**
Social movement scholars have long been concerned with what Klandermans (2004) refers to as the “supply side” of participation, by which he means the structured opportunities afforded potential participants by social movements. Klandermans argues that social movement participation results from the nexus of demand for engagement by prospective participants and a supply of protest opportunities by social movements, often provided by specific social movement organizations (SMOs). This makes sense for many kinds of structured collective actions: it is hard to participate in a rally, march, or even some kinds of online campaigns, such as online email campaigns or distributed denial of service actions, if there are none to participate in.

In addition to building opportunities for engagement, SMOs and movements more generally have to connect, as Klandermans (2004) puts it, supply and demand, by supplying opportunities and then trying to pull willing individuals into action. One aspect of this historically has been targeting specific groups for participation. For instance, young men were targeted as potential participants in the anti-Vietnam War movement, young women for second wave feminism, and young youth of color for the civil rights movement, Chicano rights movement, and American Indian movement, among others. One can measure the importance of this targeting by observing it “in the breach:” it’s clear historically how problematic a lack of targeting and/or openness to a specific sub-group can be. For instance, African-American women have long argued that a predominately white, liberal feminist movement isn’t welcoming to them or their needs and is thus likely to remain a predominately white women’s movement. Likewise, young women made similar complaints about the male-centered formal leadership structure of the civil rights movement (McAdam 1988, but see Robnett 1996) and the anti-war movement (Mollin 2009) in the 1960s and 1970s.
At the micro-level too, research suggests that it is important that individual prospective participants get connected to opportunities to participate, whether through invitations, informal networks, or formal organizational memberships. Indeed, invitations are the most obvious, and indeed critically important ways, to encourage participation. Key research in the literature on micro-mobilization suggests that being an explicit mobilization target of an SMO or a movement more broadly is important for driving participation. For instance, Klandermans and Oegema’s (1987) classic study of micro-mobilization suggests a four stage process that culminates in participation if each stage is completed successfully. Stage Two of their model requires that individuals are targeted for mobilization through recruitment networks. Likewise, Passy (2001) argues that one of the reasons that network ties have been so influential in producing participation is that invitations to participate flow through these ties. Oliver and Marwell (1992) also stress the importance of invitations to participate. In fact, Schussman and Soule’s (2005) study of predictors of protest, demonstration, or march participation in the last 12 months finds that “being asked to protest is the strongest predictor of participating in protest” (1083). Although some people still do participate without being asked, being asked outperforms every other predictor of participation. Passy and Giugni (2001) examine different data but also find being asked is one of the top two strongest predictors of participation.

One might infer from this work that if movements or SMOs are keen to include youth, then there should be explicit overtures to youth in movement-related websites. This might involve discussing issues that are important to youth, explicitly or implicitly targeting youth as prospective audience members, or explicitly asking for youth participation in the movement and/or specific events. Existing research would imply that the more these kinds of invitations to participate exist, the more mobilized youth will be. Moreover, as Schussman and Soule (2005)
found, when there are not invitations to participate, other factors such as political interest, political engagement, and civic skills should explain self-motivated engagement with a movement, meaning that movements are subject to the prevailing levels of these factors in building a mobilization base if they are not extending invitations or targeting potential participants.

Aside from specific invitations, two other key predictors of individual participation in movement activities are network ties to the movement (see Diani 2004 for a review of this area of research) and organizational ties to specific SMOs. These kinds of ties have been viewed as critical for almost forty years (Klandermans and Oegema 1987, Morris 1981, Oberschall 1973, Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson 1980). A number of studies have demonstrated the significance of networks and/or organizational ties to participation in such varied contexts as the French revolution (Gould 1991, Gould 1993) and the civil rights movement (McAdam 1988, McAdam and Paulsen 1993). Studies have consistently confirmed that both kinds of ties to a movement matters for explaining participation (e.g., Chaeyoon 2008, Passy and Giugni 2001, Schussman and Soule 2005).

If networks and organization ties are principal drivers of participation, and movements or specific SMOs want youth to participate, then one would expect that movements and SMOs should be trying to build networks that include youth and establish organizational ties to specific youth. For instance, one might expect that there would be specific sections of a SMO website targeted to youth. Websites might also focus on either issues of particular concern to youth or discuss the importance to youth of specific issues (e.g., the young will face far larger effects of climate change than individuals who are already middle-aged or retired). Alternatively, websites might try to engage youth building on research about what has made youth websites successful at
attracting youth in the past (Bachen et al. 2008, Montgomery 2001). For instance, websites might feature polls or games that give users an opportunity to interact with the content on the site. Websites might also feature online chat technologies, allowing users to interact with each other. But, if movements take none of these steps, then this important gateway to recruitment would be stunted for youth.

Thus far we have argued that it is critically important for movements and SMOs attract and engage younger participants if movements and specific SMOs are to survive across time. Moreover, if movements or SMOs hope to actively engage youth in protest, it is important to extend invitations to youth, as well as build youth-inclusive networks and organizational connections. Thus, to the extent to which youth participation is seen by some as being less prominent in contemporary protest as it was in the protest cycle of the 1960s, we argue that it is reasonable to begin by asking how movements and SMOs are trying to bring youth into movements, instead of asking, as many commentators have, what is pulling young people away from movements and/or out of activism (or at least certain forms of it). We treat the extent to which movements try to engage youth as an empirical question that can be addressed using data on a random sample of social movement-relevant websites. In the next section, we discuss these data, and in the following section we discuss our findings about the supply side for youth participation. Following that, we evaluate the skeptical possibility that any lack of a supply is a consequence, versus a cause, of youth engagement.

**Data and Methods: Supply Side**

In order to understand the supply side of activism, we constructed a database based on quantitative content coding of random samples of reachable websites engaged in twenty common social movement issues. Previous studies of youth activism online have relied on convenience
samples, focusing on one or two websites chosen for their exemplar status. While this research has produced illuminating results, these samples are unlikely to be representative of the population of online activism websites as a whole, or even of websites that engage youth in activism. In order to make representative claims, researchers need a probabilistic sample of the population. But, sampling has proven difficult because there is no practical way to pre-identify the population of all websites engaged in advocacy from which we could pull a random sample, nor is there a way to randomly guess as valid URLs, which disallows work-arounds to the lack of a population list that would be analogous to random digit dialing.

To overcome these limitations, we rely on an important simplifying assumption that makes this dilemma tractable: since we are interested in understanding public protest engagement, we assume that we only need to be able to identify all web-addressable spaces on a topic that other users could reasonably identify and visit. Thus, whether an organizational website, a blog, a public-facing Facebook or Twitter profile (i.e., no log-in required), or any other online space reachable via a web address, we are able to define the population of such spaces that potential users could also find. While forcing us to ignore the deep Web, our focus on the population of sites that we refer to as “reachable websites” (i.e., spaces we can locate without knowing the URL in advance) does allow us to map the public-facing supply side of online protest.

To do this, we use a process that mimics the way individuals usually find websites themselves – either by searching for them through a major search engine or by navigating to them through links posted on other websites the user visits. Specifically, we use repeated searches on Google since Google is the leading search engine and Googlebot, which helps to build Google’s vast database, relies on link-crawling to identify new sites. We use pre-tested
search terms designed to identify websites related to 20 different social movement areas to build lists of reachable websites on each social movement issue area. Using this method, we generated twenty samples of reachable websites for twenty different causes. This technique has been previously used to generate samples of e-tactics (Earl and Kimport 2011).

The 20 social movement issue areas were chosen to represent those that are traditionally studied by social movement scholars (e.g. Abortion and Civil Rights), causes where mobilization has increased or decreased significantly over time (e.g. Immigration and Globalization), and causes tied to the Internet (e.g. Open Source). A list of search terms was generated for each cause. These search terms were designed to capture both the progressive and conservative takes of the issue. For example, we include search terms designed to capture “pro-life” as well as “pro-choice” websites for the abortion cause. We used a total of 175 search terms across the twenty causes to generate the lists of reachable websites, which resulted in over a hundred thousand unique URLs (for more details on an earlier wave of data collection, see Earl et al., 2010).

We then drew a 1% random sample by cause and quantitatively content coded these websites for measures of internet activism as well as engagement with youth issues and youth audiences. In all, for sites identified in 2010, we coded 1,084 websites across these 20 causes. Any protest linked to or hosted by one of these sites (save sampling completed for a few massive sites) was also separately coded, yielding 3,659 protest actions.

In the analyses below, because we want to narrow our focus on to what social movement websites in particular were doing, we reduce this overall dataset in two ways. First, we only focus on websites that, when coded, contained content that appealed for change. In other words, if a site was relevant to social movements but did not engage in advocacy, it is dropped from our analyses below. Second, to ensure that our samples speak to the topic areas that sites were
sampled into it, we only analyze data from sites that advocated for change on the issue for which they were sampled. This substantially reduces our dataset: our final sample includes 363 websites and 1402 protest actions.

Coding

A team of coders content coded sites by coding 121 measures about the site and another 53 measures about every protest action hosted or linked to from those sites (e.g., online petitions websites encouraged users to sign; in person protest rallies the website invited users to attend). Coders had a reliability of 98.2% for the website level measures and 97.7% for the protest action measures.

To measure youth-facing elements of the site, we focus on three major measures of youth orientation of websites. The first measure, youth issues, measures whether the site contains content relevant to youth, regardless of the intended audience. This could include websites that tell parents how to talk to their kids about drugs, or websites that educate youth directly about sexual health. The second, youth audience, measures whether the website attempts to target a youth audience or address a youth constituency. The site could do this by containing a separate section specifically for youth, or by including youth in the intended audience more broadly. The third measure of youth engagement measures whether the website describes, hosts, or links to any protest actions that explicitly encourage youth to participate. To count as a protest action, the action should be documented on the site, and the site should endorse or encourage participation in the action. To count as encouraging youth participation, the action should be explicitly trying to recruit youth to participate, with a specific reference to youth.

Other coded measures we use in our analyses include the issues websites advocated on. These were issues or causes the website took a position on or endorsed, and reflected the
website’s stance overall. There were almost 400 detailed cause claims that could be applied, most of which were drawn from the Dynamics of Collective Action dataset (McAdam et al. 2009), but some were added to capture more recent protest developments. We also coded whether the website was operated by a SMO or not; our focus here is less on the technical operations of the site (i.e., not on the identity of the webmaster or who is responsible for the technical aspects of maintaining the site), but rather whether organizational control over the content posted to the site.

Additionally, we coded for whether the protest actions websites endorsed took place offline, took place online and were hosted by the website itself, or took place online at a different website, and so the coded website linked to the action. Offline actions required a participant to be co-present with other participants. An internal online action did require co-presence with other participants and all necessary requirements for participation could be found on the coded website. An external online action did not require co-presence and the user had to follow a link to an external website in order to participate.

Finally, we coded whether a few specific features or functions were available on websites. We coded for whether the site allowed users to get information about a cause, such as research reports or press accounts; whether the site allowed users to provide information to the site, such as posting reports or press accounts, or tip-lines that allowed users to provide information about companies with poor business practices. We also coded for whether the website allowed users to express their opinions about a cause on the site, or allowed users to read other users’ opinions. We coded whether the websites hosted polls, quizzes, games, or crossword puzzles and also coded for whether the website contained features that allowed users to chat with other users live.
Findings: The Supply Side for Youth Engagement

The central question animating this part of our study is about how often and in what ways websites demonstrably try to engage youth in activism. Figure 1 graphs the percentage of websites that engage youth across our three measures of youth engagement: content geared to youth, youth as a clear site audience, and requests for youth participation in advocacy. Nearly 40% of websites contain content on youth-related issues, while only 15% of websites targeted a youth audience, and only 3% of websites encourage youth to participate in protest actions. In other words, while websites very commonly discuss issues relevant to youth, they don’t often include youth in the intended audience of that discussion, nor do they invite youth to participate in protest actions.

[Figure 1 about here]

However, youth engagement does vary by cause, as shown in Figure 2. Labor, LGBTQ, and Globalization websites most often include youth issues. LGBTQ, Green, and Labor causes top the list in terms of targeting a youth audience, and Green, LGBTQ, and Globalization causes most frequently encourage youth participation in protest actions. These four causes, Globalization, Green, Labor, and LGBTQ, are leaders across multiple measures of youth engagement, but even these leaders rarely encourage youth participation in protest – 11% or less of websites in these causes encourage youth participation.

[Figure 2 about here]

Previous research has found a set of features that consistently promote youth engagement online, namely interactive elements such as polls, games, and live chat opportunities. Montgomery (2001) found that some of the most popular commercial sites for teens offered ways for their users to interact and express their identity and creativity through chat, message
boards, polls, quizzes, and other forms of content creation. Bachen et al (2008) similarly argue that effective engagement of youth requires higher levels of interactivity on civic websites, including features such as polls, games, and opportunities to chat with other users. They find, however, that civic websites do not often include these features when they try to target youth. Figure 3 graphs the percentage of websites with these features and other opportunities for engagement for websites that target a youth audience, and for websites that do not target a youth audience (i.e., have a presumptively adult audience). Few websites contain polls, games, or live chat features. While nearly all websites allow users to get information about a cause, only about half allow users to express their opinions about a cause or to view other users’ opinions. Less than a quarter of websites allow users to provide information about a cause.

Not only are these features not common on websites in general, they are not often more common on websites that we could consider youth-facing based on three primary indicators of youth engagement. That is, the difference between websites that target a youth audience and those that don’t are largely negligible. Only live chat and the ability to provide information to a website have statistically significant differences, in each case youth targeting websites contain the feature more often than adult websites. However, both of these features are relatively rare, even for youth targeting websites. The three features that previous research has pointed to as being effective at engaging youth online are rare elements of websites overall.

It is also worthwhile to understand the kinds of actions that youth are targeted to engage in. In Figure 4, we display the percentage of websites that engaged youth across each type of action the website offered. For example, 46% of websites that promoted offline protest actions
included youth content, while only 15% of such websites targeted a youth audience or encouraged youth participation in protest actions. Across all types of protest offerings, including youth issues is relatively common, but targeting a youth audience or encouraging youth participation is more rare. Websites that facilitate protest participation, then, are not targeting youth for participation very often, which should raise some concerns given the importance of targeting and invitations.

Thus far, we have established that despite having a great deal of content relevant to youth, only a small minority of websites explicitly target youth as a site audience, fewer still ask youth to participate in social movement advocacy, and few also include feature-sets that have been commonly identified on youth-oriented websites. This speaks directly to the larger issue we are raising: movements sites are not doing much to engage youth, so it should not surprise scholars (given what we know about targeting and invitations as well as network and organizational ties) that youth may not be as engaged as social movement activists would prefer. But, instead of following Gladwell or Morozov’s lead, we argue this perceived participation gap more likely owes to a fault on the supply side of social movements (we return to the demand side in the next several sections).

In order to understand the dimension of this supply side better, though, we also are interested in how different types of youth engagement are distributed across sites with different characteristics. Since SMOs, in particular, are often responsible for recruitment and targeting, we are interested in the extent to which sites run by SMOs engage youth, versus those not run by SMOs. As shown in Figure 5, roughly 31% of websites that are not affiliated with an SMO contain youth issues, whereas 47% of websites that are affiliated with an SMO contain youth
issues. SMO-run websites are also more likely to explicitly locate youth as part of their audience by at least having a section of their website dedicated to youth. However, very few websites invite youth participation in protest actions, although SMO-run websites are more likely to do so than non-SMO run sites. These differences between sites are significant (with issue and audience significantly different at the .01 level, and advocacy significantly different at the .05 level).

If we look at this distribution from the other direction, it is easy to see that this difference between SMO and non-SMO websites markedly shapes whether youth engagement opportunities are organizationally-directed or not: sixty percent of websites that contain youth issues are affiliated with a SMO, nearly 70% of sites that target a youth audience are SMO affiliated, and 90% of sites encourage youth participation in protest actions are SMO affiliated. But, again, this is still dividing a minority of sites, as was shown in Figure 5. This suggests that while there is not a massive supply side for youth engagement on advocacy websites, websites run by SMOs are more likely to be trying to engage youth than non-SMO operated sites.

It is also reasonable to ask whether websites that target youth are narrowly focused on a small set of issues, or engage a broader range of topics. We think of this in terms of cause-based specialization and divide sites into generalist versus specialist websites.\(^1\) While it is possible that specialists may try to frame their argument to fit multiple audiences, including youth, leading to

\(^1\) We first grouped individual causes into cause families (e.g. Black civil rights, LGBT Rights, Homelessness) and then calculated the number of different cause families a website engaged with. We chose a cut-off of engaging in three or more different cause families as defining a generalist organization, which represents the 50\(^{th}\) percentile for number of cause families a website was coded as engaging. Engaging in fewer than three causes meant the organization was coded as specialist.
a higher specialist rate of youth engagement, we think it is more likely that the broader the site is in terms of cause advocacy, the more likely the site is to be broad enough to also engage youth related issues. Figure 6 graphs the percentage of generalist versus specialist websites that engaged youth across our three engagement measures. As expected, it shows that generalist websites are significantly more likely to have youth content on them, but there is no significant difference between generalist and specialist sites in terms of youth audience and youth participation. Generalist websites contained youth related issues over half the time, while specialist websites only included youth issues a third of the time. Since generalist websites engage many different causes, they have more opportunities to engage youth in any particular cause.

**Is Supply Just Responding to Demand?**

We are arguing that social movements have not done enough to create a supply of opportunities for youth engagement across social movements. But, a critical reader might suggest that movements and specific SMOs have not targeted youth specifically because there is little demand on the part of youth for this engagement. That is, instead of “wasting” resources by trying to attract uninterested youth, these websites are focused on older groups that are more likely to be interested, or at least not specifically discussing age so as to limit the extent to which any given audience may be alienated. However, we conduct a secondary analysis of data from a 2011 nationally representative survey of youth to argue that there is substantial demand from youth for different kinds of engagement, and that youth are actually managing to engage despite lacking a sufficient supply side.

**Data and Methods: Measuring Demand**
The Youth Participatory Politics (YPP) Survey, is a survey of a nationally representatives sample of 2,920 youth, collected in 2011, in which respondents were asked questions about their engagement with politics, online digital media, and civic and volunteer programs. We use this dataset to address the demand side of activism, in particular what kinds of activities youth are currently engaging in.

Specifically, we construct four measures of youth engagement from the survey data: participation in institutional politics; protest; participatory politics; and/or volunteerism. We look at all four to create a fuller and contextualized image of youth political demand. All measures are based on answers to a series of questions about specific types of activities the respondent had engaged in within the last twelve months. We note that our grouping of questions from the survey to measure these concepts varies slightly from other published work using the survey (e.g., Cohen et al. 2012). But, we think this grouping does the best job of capturing traditional definitions of social movement advocacy versus other kinds of engagement.

Specifically, for institutional politics, a respondent scored 1 on this measure if they answered yes to worked on a political campaign, wore a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on their car, or placed a sign in their front yard, expressed support for a campaign on a social network, raised or donated money for a campaign, or signed up to receive information from a campaign. If the respondent had voted in the last election, they were also coded as engaging in institutional politics.

To be coded as having engaged in protest, a respondent should have responded yes to taking part in a protest, demonstration, or sit-in; attending a meeting, rally, speech, or dinner
related to politics\textsuperscript{2}; starting or joining a political group on a social networking site; participating in a boycott, or in a “buycott” (where someone buys a product because they like the social or political values of the company that makes the product); or signed a petition either online or offline.

A respondent is coded as having engaged in participatory politics, which is a concept directed at understanding how youth may more broadly and actively engage in politics (Soep 2014), if they forwarded or posted someone else’s political commentary or news; contributed their own article, opinion piece, picture, or video about a political campaign or issue; forwarded or circulated a funny video, comic, or other artistic item about a political campaign or issue; commented on a news story or blog about a political campaign or issue, written an email or a blog post about a campaign or issue; or participated in an event where young people expressed their political views, such as a poetry slam or musical event.

Finally, the volunteering measure was coded as 1 if the respondent raised money for a charitable cause, participated in a community service or volunteer activity, or worked or cooperated with others to try to solve a problem affecting their city or neighborhood that was not political in nature. Table 1 lists these questions, as well as the proportion of respondents who responded yes to the question. Since youth may find their own routes to these forms of activity, even if finding that route is quite difficult because the supply of such opportunities is so constrained, we regard actual participation in the last year in these activities as a very

\textsuperscript{2} This question could also potentially include rallies in support of a political candidate, for instance, and so by including it with protest we risk understating participation in institutional activities.
conservative measure of demand. Indeed, if anything, this level of activity might have been higher still if the supply of invites and engagement with youth was deeper.

**Results: Measuring Youth Demand**

Figure 7 contains figures showing the percentage of respondents from the YPP Survey who engaged in each of the four types of activities. Roughly half each participated in institutional politics and volunteered, and around one third each engaged in protest and/or participatory politics. These numbers show that youth are engaged in (institutional and non-institutional) political and civic activities at relatively high rates. Three quarters of respondents participated in at least one type of activity, and nearly half participated in more than 1 (see figure 8), reinforcing Cohen et al.’s (2012) that political and civic activities tend to be additive versus substitutions for one another. Together, the data suggest that claims that youth are, or prefer to be (as demand would have it), disengaged falls flat.

[Figures 7 and 8 about here]

Political engagement is quite varied across all four types of engagement we measure. Table 1 contains the percent of respondents participating in a category of activity that engaged in a specific activity within that category. Of those that said they participated in institutional political activities, three quarters said they voted in the last election, and over half said they had expressed support for a campaign, candidate, or issue online. Nearly a third said they wore a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on their car, or displayed a campaign sign in their front yard. Unsurprising, the most common type of volunteering activity is community service, 88% of volunteering respondents reported participating in community service. Over half of volunteering respondents reported raising money for charity, and about a third of volunteering respondents helped solve a problem facing their neighborhood. Of the respondents who engaged in
participatory politics, 62% forwarded a funny video or cartoon about a political issue, half posted someone else’s political commentary, and almost half commented on a news item or blog post about a political issue. These numbers show that youth are engaged in a variety of political and civic activities, many of which are happening offline.

[Table 1 about here]

In terms of activities traditionally associated with social movements, which is of particular interest here, of the third of respondents who do participate in protest activities, almost half of them signed an online petition, and an equal percent signed a petition offline. Nearly a third of protesters participated in a boycott, and roughly the same percentage started or joined a political group online. Strikingly, a quarter of respondents who participated in protest did so by attended a rally, meeting, or speech, and a similar participation participated in a boycott. Only 17 percent of respondents who engaged in a protest activity actually engaged in a protest, demonstration, or sit-in, but this compares favorably to overall population estimates, which sets the proportion of adults who have participated in protest in the last year at around 6% (Schussman and Soule 2005).

We read these values as showing that even though activist websites reach out to youth at very low rates, youth are still finding ways to participate in protest activity. Interestingly, given research by Schussman and Soule (2005), this should suggest that this participation will be strongly driven by political interest, political engagement, and civic skills, whereas a more traditional expectation would be that activism would be driven by network and organization ties, frame alignment, and biographical availability. This may have implications for scholars attempting to explain the determinants of youth engagement and for social movement processes, given the different micro-mobilization dynamics. But, at the biggest picture level, our findings
suggest that critics who would see the low supply of youth opportunities on websites as a consequence of youth disengagement, instead of a cause, are mistaken according to these data.

**Discussion: Youth and Traditional Political Engagement**

There is well-worn debate surrounding youth institutional political engagement in the social sciences: following Putnam’s (2000) warnings about declining social capital and increasing political and civic disengagement, a number of commentators focused on the “disengagement” of youth, which led governments, funders, and civic organizations to hand-wring over what could be done to improve youth engagement. At the same time, other scholars contested Putnam’s claims, and their implications, on a range of grounds (see Stolle and Hooghe 2005 for a brief review of critical replies).

Where youth are concerned, two key rebuttals have been centrally important. First, scholars have argued that models of citizenship have changed and that concerns about declining engagement are exclusively measuring old-fashioned forms of engagement. That is, in much the same way that industrialization and urbanization didn’t entirely undoe solidarity, but instead changed its form (Durkheim 1984), researchers have argued that younger citizens simply have been moving from a more traditional, or “dutiful,” model of citizenship to an “engaged” (Dalton 2009) or “actualized” (Bennett 2008) model of citizenship. This new model of citizenship places less stress on institutional forms of engagement, such as voting, and relatively more emphasis on non-institutional engagement (e.g., protest; Dalton 2009), civic engagement (e.g., volunteering; Dalton 2009), and other forms of more personalized political expression (Bennett 2008). In a similar vein, Dahlgren has argued that contemporary youth engagement represents new civic culture (Dahlgren 2000, Dahlgren 2005, Dahlgren and Olsson 2007).
In the data from the YPP survey that we investigated above, these arguments would expect lower levels of participation in institutional politics (e.g., voting and campaign participation) but high levels of participation in protest, participatory politics, and volunteering. While youth’s participation in institutional politics was actually quite strong, it is also the case that there was substantial involvement in these other areas of engagement, but they did not substitute for one another.

Second, scholars have also argued that to the extent to which there may have been some decline in youth institutional political engagement, current political elites might be more to blame than youth are for this disengagement. For instance, Bennett (2008), among others, argues that highly negative political campaigns and a seemingly unresponsive political system facing grand challenges that even the most functional of political systems may struggle to resolve have come together to drive declining trust and/or interest in traditional political institutions. In other words, it is not just that youth opted into new forms of citizenship, but also that the negative climate of institutional politics drove them out of more traditional forms of engagement. However, according to the data we reviewed, these disengaging effects might be overstated. Indeed, despite what most commentators would likely agree is a troubled political environment that risks creating widespread disinterest among not just youth, but citizens more generally, it appears that youth are nonetheless still quite active according to the YPP survey data.

Thus, while we agree that these two replies to Putnam have merit, we engage this well-rehearsed debate in a novel way. Instead of assuming that social movements and other forms of extra-institutional engagement have received youth interest with open arms, our examination of the supply side of participation has shown that youth are engaging despite a lack of significant targeting and tailoring. It is a reasonable hypothesis, which future research should investigate, to
suspect that if movements are already enjoying substantial youth engagement without those efforts, movements might be able to generate far more youth support and engagement if they do try to explicitly reach out to youth. More generally, we argue that the same could be said of campaigns. Participatory politics is often a self-made opportunity, although certainly campaigns and SMOs could work to make their content more sharable, editable, and participatory as well. Likewise, it is possible that one of the reasons that so much volunteering by youth occurs is that there are already so many structured opportunities for youth to volunteer. Opportunities to volunteer are often structured into high school and college curriculums through service learning and the volunteer sector has a great deal of experience offering opportunities for youth engagement.

More broadly, our point is to add a third critical reply to Putnam-like concerns about youth engagement: instead of assuming that youth are being offered ample opportunities to get involved and refusing, it is important to investigate the supply side of youth opportunities for engagement to determine whether what is being offered meets the actual or desired demand by youth. It would seem that social movements that could benefit from greater youth engagement need to start with the simplest of steps: trying to actually engage youth and cast youth not just as a subject affected by activism but as an actual audience the movement needs to target and as agentic actors who can contribute to movements through their participation.

**Conclusion**

Our research tackles an ongoing concern among social movement scholars and activists about the declining role of youth in social movements. We argue that the problem is not that youth are disengaging from social movements, but that social movements are not properly providing opportunities for youth to engage. We show empirically this to be the case. Analyzing
a representative sample of advocacy websites across 20 different issues, we find that
opportunities for youth participation are generally very low and that youth are not often part of
the intended audience of advocacy websites. We also show that advocacy websites are not
responding to any actual lack of demand when deciding whether to focus on youth are not, that
youth are, in fact, engaged in a variety of institutional and participatory political, volunteer, and
protest activities, despite not often being invited to do so. These results serve to punctuate
Klandermans and Oegema’s (1987) point that successfully mobilizing someone requires the
individual to at least be asked.

As we mentioned earlier, if youth are not invited to participate by existing movements
and their organizations, they will find their way to participation through other means. This could
explain the rise of movements like Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, and the novel tactics
used by young women to protest the lack of appropriate action to address sexual assault on
college campuses. Youth are finding ways to protest outside traditional movement organizations
because these organizations are not themselves providing opportunities for youth to participate.
Continuing to ignore youth in their mobilizing tactics could be disastrous for movement
organizations, for these organizations may not be able to replace members as older participates
demobilize.

Our research also speaks to youth civic engagement more broadly. The survey data show
that youth are not as disengaged as some have worried – three quarter of youth, when asked, said
they had engaged volunteer, protest, institutional or participatory political activities. The lack of
explicit opportunities for youth to participate in protest through websites may also be reflective
of a lack of opportunities for youth engagement more generally. Any disengagement from a
particular activity may be due to a lack of opportunities for youth to participate in that activity.
Researchers concerned about the decline in youth participation in institutional politics should pay more attention to the ways in which youth are participating in political and civic life, and the opportunities available to youth within existing institutions and organizations.
References


Figure 1: Percentage of Websites that Engage Youth across Three Different Measures

- **Youth Issues:**
  - Youth Issue: 39%
  - No Youth Issue: 61%

- **Youth Audience:**
  - Youth Inclusive Section: 7%
  - Not Targeted: 84%

- **Youth Actions:**
  - Encourages Youth Participation: 3%
  - Does not Encourage: 97%
Figure 2: Percentage of Websites Engaging Youth Across Causes

- Labor
- LGBTQ
- Globalization
- Civil Liberties
- Human Rights
- Poverty
- Homelessness
- Health
- Women's
- Green
- CRM
- Educ
- Immigration
- Privacy
- Abortion
- Right Wing
- IP
- Peace
- Open Source
- Nuclear

Legend:
- Issues
- Audience
- Actions
Figure 3: Percentage of Websites with Features by Audience
Figure 4: Percent of Websites that Engage Youth by Protest Offerings
Figure 5: Youth Engagement by SMO Involvement in Site
Figure 6: Youth Engagement in Specialist versus Generalist Websites
Figure 7: Youth Participation in Politic and Civic Activities

- Institutional: Yes 50.3%, No 49.7%
- Volunteering: Yes 50.4%, No 49.6%
- Social Movements: Yes 35.3%, No 64.7%
- Participatory Politics: Yes 32.5%, No 67.5%
Figure 8: Percentage of Youth Involved in Number of Different Activities
Table 1: Percent of Respondents Participating in Activities by Category of Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percent of Category</th>
<th>Percent Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you vote in the election last November?</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing support through a social network site such as Facebook, IM or Twitter</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing a campaign button, putting a campaign sticker on your car, or placing a sign in your window or in front of your home</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed up to receive information from candidates or campaigns via email or text</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working on a campaign</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising or donating money online (via website, Facebook, text)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising or donating money offline methods (check, donations at an event)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participatory Politics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forwarded or circulated funny videos or cartoons or circulated something artistic that related to a political candidate, campaign or political issues</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forwarded or posted someone else's political commentary or news related to a political campaign, candidate or issue</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commented on a news story or blog you read online about a political campaign, candidate or issue</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written an email or written a blog about a political campaign, candidate or issue</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in an event where young people express their political views (such as poetry slam, musical event, etc)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributed your own article, opinion piece, picture or video about a political campaign, candidate or issue to an online news site</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Volunteering</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in a community service or volunteer activity?</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised money for a charitable cause?</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked or cooperated with others to try to solve a (non-political) problem affecting your city or neighborhood?</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Protest</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed a paper petitions</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed an email, Facebook, or other online petition</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged in buycott, that is buying a certain product because you like the social or political values of the company that produces or sells the product</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting or joining a political group on a social network site</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending a meeting, rally, speech, or dinner</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in a boycott, that is not buying something because of the conditions under which the product is made or because you dislike the conduct of the company that produces it</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken part in a protest, demonstration, or sit-in</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>