

Eyes on Parkland: Understanding Youth Civic Engagement in the Aftermath of a Mass Shooting

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Abstract

Youth are currently participating in civic and social life, often using social media and organizing in ways unique to their generation. In this position paper we apply several theoretical frameworks to the specific case of youth civic engagement in the aftermath of the 2018 mass shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida to identify lessons about youth participation. The institutional adultism the Parkland students faced warrants a closer look at both the assets and challenges youth and adults face when entering youth-adult partnerships. We call for future research to continue unpacking the intersectional, contextual, and power-laden dynamics of youth civic engagement.

Keywords: youth civic engagement, Parkland, Florida, social justice, gun violence

On February 14th, 2018 a white, 19-year-old, former Stoneman Douglas High School student entered the grounds of his alma mater in Parkland, Florida with a bag full of ammunition and unloaded several rounds of bullets on students, teachers, and staff. Dozens were wounded and 17 people were killed. The aftermath of the mass shooting resulted in extraordinary community activity with young people in the lead. After the shooting in Parkland, high school students rallied and spoke out about the preventable deaths precipitated by a lack of gun laws and regulations, calling out gun lobbies and politicians on social media, and organizing a national protest (March for Our Lives) less than a month after the shooting.

Mass shootings in public spaces, the high-profile killings of unarmed Black youth by police, and large movements of young people into the streets to protest these conditions are beginning to feel common. Youth are participating in civic and social life, often using social media and organizing in ways unique to their generation. Yet, an examination of youth civic engagement through the lens of voting patterns and expectations to vote in the future would not have predicted the large movements of young people into the streets, voicing their opinions on social media, and organizing around issues that matter to them in ways that are quite extraordinary. In other words, national conversations about youth civic engagement are revealing inherent contradictions about how young people engage in civic life. The case of youth organizing and protest in the aftermath of the mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida exemplifies the movement of young people into national conversations and highlights the contemporary socio-political context of youth civic engagement. There are lessons to be drawn from the case of Parkland.

The case of the Parkland youth illuminates the academic frameworks of youth civic engagement, while also challenging dominant narratives about what young people want and where they belong within political hierarchies. Youth-adult partnerships must reckon with institutional adultism, or the reality that social and political hierarchies routinely exclude youth from decision-making. And yet, the case of Parkland tells us that young people are informed and ready to engage in civic life. Central to our argument is the struggle (on-the-ground and in the literature) between amplifying youth voice and authentic youth-adult power-sharing. As we explore the national narratives about the youth of Parkland, we also illustrate the intersectional means by which circumstance and privilege highlight the voice of some youth more than others.

The Framing of Youth Civic Engagement

Youth civic engagement is a broad concept, ranging from a singular activity (e.g., voting), to on-going processes (e.g., youth councils), specialized projects (e.g., participatory budgeting), and community organizing activities. These and other forms each engage youth perspectives into community life and, simultaneously, experientially educate youth about the choices, settings, and actors necessary to influence change. These various activities, and many others, present a range of possibilities for theorizing and examining different youth-led community efforts. Scholars have identified typologies to help categorize the broad range of possible activities that can occur under the umbrella of civic engagement. Checkoway and

Aldana (2013), for example, identified four forms, recognizing some overlap in categories: citizen participation, grassroots organizing, intergroup dialogue, and sociopolitical development. Taft and Gordon (2013) also distinguished between civic opportunities for youth that are available within government (e.g., youth councils) versus those that are available outside of government (e.g., youth community organizing).

Our previous research examining formal settings of youth civic engagement in the context of youth councils identified three common theoretical frameworks for understanding youth civic engagement: policy process, positive youth development, and social justice (Collins et al., 2018). We compared these three frameworks on factors such as: membership and role of adults, meetings, activities, social networks, and involvement with government. We describe the three briefly below and describe Parkland youth activities that fit within each frame.

Policy Process

Policy process models are those that operate within or very close to government and in many ways model operations of other types of government councils. Youth councils operating primarily from a policy process frame require some adult guidance to navigate formal processes and are characterized by fairly formal meetings including access to policy makers. Activities are policy-focused and aim to have community impact. Social networks are important in order to access opportunities to serve. Because the policy focus is predominant, these groups of young people tend to operate formally within governments and can have access to decision-makers.

Youth political participation is significant in the narrative of Parkland and represents a policy process framework. Young people used social media and other news outlets to protest gun laws, while simultaneously lobbying lawmakers and gaining the attention of powerful government and private sector leaders. Days after the shooting, students organized a lobbying action, with more than 40 students (accompanied by teachers and parents) traveling to the state house to meet with lawmakers (Founders of March for Our Lives, 2018). Additionally, youth demanded to know why more was not done to prevent shootings and ban assault weapons; on CNN (later reported by *The Washington Post*), Parkland student Lyliah Skinner was quoted as saying, "How are we allowed to buy guns at the age of 18 or 19? That's something we shouldn't be able to do" (Viebeck, 2018). While these young people were outsiders to the "formal" policy realm, their access to lawmakers and ability to have their voices heard on a national level is remarkable for a population that often lacks voice and power in civic life (Collins & Mead, 2020). The efforts of the Parkland youth clearly were aimed at achieving specific policy actions related to gun safety.

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development models of youth civic engagement are premised upon the extensive and wide-ranging attributes of youth development practice: asset- (rather than deficit-) focused, collaborative, community-oriented, competency-building, connected, valuing cultural membership, holistic, long-range, normative,

promotive, and universal (Amodeo & Collins, 2007). Positive youth development emphasizes “comprehensive views of youth as assets, as individuals with resources and capabilities that deserve full support and development” (Costello et al., 2001). Youth development models are characterized by youth-adult partnerships where adults are knowledgeable about and practice positive youth development. Meetings tend to have more informal procedures and are activity-focused. Activities of the group aim at youths’ skill development (e.g., public speaking, running meetings). Social networks focus on socialization and there can be a minimal focus on formal government.

In regard to Parkland, the positive youth development frame presents itself implicitly, as a foundational characteristic undergirding the support, sympathy, and resources visible within the narrative about the Parkland teens. At least initially, extensive sympathy was a key characteristic. On the day of the shooting, *The Washington Post* reported on the on-air breakdown of CNN counterterrorism analyst Philip Mudd. This seasoned journalist, used to reporting on acts of terrorism around the world, was shaken by Parkland and said on live television, “A child of God is dead. Can we not acknowledge in this country that we cannot accept this?” and then sobs and turns away from the camera (Wemple, 2018). Notably, there were implicit statements about the value of children’s lives.

Positive youth development is the strategic valuing and empowerment of youth based on an assets-focused approach (Amodeo & Collins, 2007). The voices of the Stoneman Douglas students were cultivated and emboldened, so when tragedy struck, not only were these young people publicly and emphatically mourned, but their voices were valued. Youth leaders such as Cameron Kasky, David Hogg, Jaclyn Corin, and Emma Gonzalez possessed the skills necessary to face the media (e.g., public speaking, creative writing, organizing, etc.). It is not surprising to learn that these students were class officers and Advanced Placement students, and had already expressed an interest in politics and leadership (Bent, 2020; Founders of March for Our Lives, 2018). Their educational opportunities were instrumental in cultivating their skills to engage in civic action.

Social Justice

Social justice “is a broad macro-level term that recognizes and addresses structural and systemic inequalities through an analysis of power relations and identifies the need for active engagement to address inequalities” (Collins et al., 2018, p. 602). Thus, social justice frameworks emphasize connection to community, equity and inclusion. Meetings emphasize procedural justice, making sure all voices are heard and offering significant opportunity for discussion of diversity and justice. Activities are youth-driven and community engaged. Access is based on representation of one’s community. There is a strong focus on youth being experts in their own lives and the right for their voices to be heard. Activities are often carried out outside of government as the government is viewed as representing the interests of dominant powers.

Initially, the youth of Parkland were met with overflowing sympathy and grief, but as the youth began to shape their own narrative and desires for change, the media

coverage shifted. In the evolving politicization of the Parkland youth, the social justice framework is evident in 1) the call for youth rights and a need to listen to youth voices, and 2) in the collaboration in which Parkland youth engaged that attempted to broaden the lens of gun violence. The media's concern for the rights of youth (Farhi, 2018), as well as from among youth themselves who demanded their voices be heard, evokes the social justice framework by amplifying the issues of rights, agency and autonomy.

The March for Our Lives movement extended efforts to amplify issues of gun violence beyond Parkland (Cullen, 2019). This took the form of broadening the youth organizers within the movement (Chandler, 2018) and the "sibling" protests that Parkland inspired throughout the country (Moyer, 2018), as well as specific efforts on the part of Parkland organizers to reach out and meet with youth of color who were similarly active in fighting for gun restrictions and other youth-driven concerns but who garnered less media attention (Lang, 2018).

Paradox of Youth Voice: Attention versus Power

Framing the case of Parkland in terms of the three youth civic engagement frameworks illustrates that young people engage in civic dialogue in multiple ways and seek to elevate their voices within and outside of formal structures. The Parkland case unequivocally promotes the message that youth are informed and ready to engage, particularly around issues and priorities that matter to them.

Scholars have suggested there are important differences in the contexts of engagement and, consequently, the reasons why youth choose to engage. In one example, Conner and Cosner (2016) compared youth involved in a government-sanctioned youth commission versus a community-based organizing group. The researchers concluded that although both sets of youth saw themselves as civic actors and change agents, youth organizers saw greater need for systemic change whereas youth commissioners had greater trust in government systems. Similarly, Cushing and van Vliet- (2016) noted that official venues may not be the most important participatory settings as these reflect mainstream approaches to change (Taft & Gordon, 2013). Taft and Gordon (2013) identified the need for further research to examine the different contexts in which youth participate in civic life.

Social networking has been recognized as a critical tool in the organizing efforts of youth, in particular because it can overcome the siloing of singular efforts within a school or community (Kornbluh et al., 2016). In one recent study, Boulianne (2015) conducted a meta-analysis examining the association between social networking sites and political activities. This research found that 82% of the studies included in the review indicated a positive correlation between participating in a social networking site and engaging in social action (including demonstrations and rallies), especially among youth and young adults (15-30 years).

Also relevant is the extent to which adults are a part of the youth-focused effort and the nature of their relationship with young people engaged in civic engagement. The adult-youth relationship is critical in understanding variation within youth civic engagement. There is a robust literature on this (Hart, 1992;

Wong et al., 2010) that provides several typologies of youth participation, particularly in relation to adults. Integral to these typologies is the power sharing relationship between young people and adults, and the degree to which youth have meaningful voice in decision making (Zeldin et al., 2014). Evident within the Parkland case are the implicit and explicit roles adults played in supporting, amplifying, and later criticizing youth.

What about Power Sharing?

Yes, Parkland students were engaged and their social positions (e.g., majority white, middle-class, suburban) gave them access to much sympathy. Yet, after about a week of coverage that focused on Parkland youth as victims, even these privileged youth began to experience media criticism and backlash. National news coverage first critiqued the efficacy and longevity of social media activism (Timberg & Lowery, 2018), followed by online conspiracies painting students like David Hogg as a “crisis actor” (Timberg et al., 2018) and attempts to pigeon-hole students like Emma Gonzalez as exceptional and/or *the* leader of the movement (Bent, 2020). In other words, as the students of Parkland become more politically vocal and demanded change, criticisms of the youth mounted.

While there exists a robust literature about the importance and utility of youth-adult partnerships, the case of Parkland portrays adults as unprepared to listen to young people. Or, more to the point, adults might have been willing to listen but that did not materialize into affording them the power to make change. In fact, once Parkland youth attempted to both expand their voice and change policy, and began to focus on the National Rifle Association (NRA), massive adult resistance occurred. This is evident in the dwindling national media coverage, youths’ overwhelming lack of access in regard to policy and local politics, and ultimately how little policy changed in the wake of the organizing. Even for the Parkland students, who acknowledged their privileged identities and status (Founders of March for Our Lives, 2018), it remains true that “children live lives outside the normative terms of political recognition giving them limited access to power and rights-driven legibility” (Bent, 2019, p. 70).

While Parkland students were valued and given voice within the national conversation about gun violence—facilitated in part by the socioeconomic and racial make-up of their community—institutional adultism belies the status quo that children and youth fundamentally lack access to practice, policy, and legal decisions (Flasher, 1978). Several scholars have more recently discussed institutional adultism as age-based policies that make it impossible for young people to access voting and political representation, even though these arenas of social and political life deeply impact children and youth (DeJong & Love, 2015; Godwin, 2011).

It is unsurprising then, that by the time the Parkland youth earnestly began organizing the March for Our Lives, they sought to distance themselves from adults. Only youth activists were allowed to speak at the event on the National Mall, and in the call for official poster designs the group limited submissions to individuals under 24 years old (Alter, 2018). The move to distance themselves from adults illustrates an awareness among the organizers of the limitations of youth-adult partnership. In

order to maintain legitimacy, whether in the eyes of other youth, the media, or themselves, the Parkland youth sought to project the image that young people can engage in policy processes and social justice on their own terms. Importantly, “on their own terms” does not equate to without adults—parents, teachers, and advisers helped develop and support these teenagers into the competent and empowered public speakers and leaders they became. Yet, as the organizers witnessed the unwillingness of politicians to make meaningful change around gun laws, they sought to exclude adults from everything except to “order pizza”(Alter, 2018).

While we and many others applaud the Parkland organizers for using their platform to expand the conversation about gun violence, it remains important to consider the Parkland youth within the context of privilege and all that their social positions provided in terms of positive youth development. Yes, the Parkland students sought to expand attention beyond their school’s tragedy to include gun violence occurring in marginalized communities. Yes, this included touring with a range of youth activists and the inclusion of Naomi Wadler¹ at the March for Our Lives. And yet, attention on Parkland (and Columbine and Sandy Hook before it) illustrates the inherent status and sympathy majority white and affluent communities possess within the national narrative.

A youth backlash towards adultism, or rather a disinterest in collaboration, is justified given the intense scrutiny and trauma endured by the Parkland youth. Still, institutional adultism warrants a closer look at both the assets and challenges youth and adults face when entering youth-adult partnerships. There is a fundamental imbalance of power when these actors work together: materially, culturally, politically. The positive youth development frame demonstrates that young people possess the assets of idealism and visionary thinking, and when motivated can create innovative solutions. Understanding positive youth development demands an intersectional analytical framework (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) for understanding how people with different combinations of socio-political identities and positions (e.g., age, race, class, gender, ability, geographic location) encounter and experience different and unique forms of privilege and oppression in society (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Intersectionality scholars note that there are interconnecting structures of power in society that inequitably and differentially distribute power and privileges to some and harm and oppression to others (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Adults bear the difficult job of translating the intricacies of systems, particularly political systems, while also maintaining an ingrained respect for the rights and autonomy of youth. The academic literature on adult-youth partnerships needs to continue unpacking the intersectional, contextual, and power-laden dynamics existent among its actors.

¹ A 12-year-old African-American middle-school student, inspired by the Parkland protests, Wadler, alongside a fellow student, organized a walk-out during school. Students stood in silence for 18-minutes, recognizing the 17 Parkland individuals killed while also honoring the death of Courtlin Arrington, a black girl killed during a school shooting in March, 2018 in Alabama. Wadler’s walkout received national media attention and Wadler was later invited by the March for Our Lives organizers to speak at the event in Washington, D.C.

Conclusion

Through the lens of innocence, the national spotlight granted Marjorie Stoneman Douglas students empathy and elevated their voices, but as the students became more vocal against the political status quo, criticism of the students increased. Adults constructed massive resistance to the voices of Parkland youth and hindered progress around reforming gun violence. That said, the response to the shooting created a rallying call for youth across the country to mobilize around the issue of gun violence. While this position paper does not examine the extent to which the Parkland activism inspired others, future research should consider the ripple effects of such periods of national spotlight on youth activism and youth-led organizing.

The media coverage of youth civic engagement in Parkland highlights that young people care deeply about issues such as gun reform and safety in their communities. Our discussion of Parkland in the context of civic engagement frameworks confirm that youth *are* engaging in civic life and have the skills to identify community issues and present relevant solutions. The students' actions demonstrated elements of policy process, positive youth development, and social justice frames; youth in Parkland had the skills, knowledge, and relationships with adults to engage in policy-focused activities. The fact that they had a clear focus on gun control helped to move their agenda forward. Addressing legislation related to gun control was a major element of their activities.

Understanding youth civic engagement requires an intersectional approach; age, class, race and place are deeply rooted in the story of the Parkland mass shooting and the ways and means youth activism erupted afterwards. While political systems and structures are intrinsically designed to exclude youth from decision-making, the promise of youth includes the belief that things can change. It might be difficult for many adults to share power with youth in politics, schools, and organizations; however, young people themselves are already dreaming of such possibilities.

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