Me Generation and that of a college population motivated by idealism" (Morse, 1992, p. 2). It is the tension between these two stereotypes that warrants further examination. In addition, we need to explore the reasons why many young people appear to be indifferent toward politics.

When eighteen-to-twenty year-olds were given the right to vote in 1971, it was thought that the extension of the franchise would do much to address youth alienation. Since that time, however, there has been a steady decline in young voters' interest and participation in the political process. This lack of interest in voting culminated in the 1990 off-year elections when just one in five eighteen-to-twenty year-olds bothered to vote (Morin and Balz, 1992). We have already seen that many citizens think that voting has little meaningful impact on important policy decisions. Apparently, America's youth share this view, although there was an upturn in voter turnout among eighteen-to-twenty year-olds in the 1992 presidential election. In 1988 only 36 percent of members of that age group voted in the presidential election, but 45 percent of eligible voters aged eighteen to twenty voted in 1992 (Mathews's introduction to Kettering study [Harwood Group, 1993, p. iii]). It remains to be seen whether this increase in voter turnout among the young can be maintained in future elections.

Indeed, recent studies of college students conducted by the UCLA/American Council on Education, "The American Freshman," and the annual "Roper College Track" report found that college freshmen matriculating during the 1994–1995 academic year were "more disengaged from politics than any previous entering class; only 31.9 percent of the fall 1994 freshmen—lowest in the history of the survey—say that 'keeping up with political affairs' is an important goal in life, compared to 42.4 percent in 1990, and 57.8 percent in 1966." The authors of the report concluded that "considering that the figure from 1993—a nonelection year—was 37.6 percent, the sharp drop in the fall 1994 election year survey is all the more unexpected." The UCLA findings provide more evidence of disengagement from politics. The percentage of "freshmen who say they frequently 'discuss politics' reached its lowest point ever in the fall 1994 survey: 16.0 percent, compared to 18.8 percent the previous year and 24.6 percent in 1992 (the highest point of 29.9 percent was recorded during the 1968 election year) (Higher Education Research Institute, [1995], p. 1).

The UCLA data for the fall 1995 entering class suggest an even grimmer picture regarding college students' interest in political affairs. The study found that "students' commitment to 'keeping up to date with political affairs' as an important life goal dropped for the third straight year to an all-time low of 28.5 percent, compared with 42.4 percent in 1990 and 57.8 percent in 1966." The percent who discuss politics frequently also continued its downward slide to an all-time low of 14.8 percent (down from 24.6 percent in 1992 and 29.9 in 1968). Finally, reinforcing these trends is the conclusion that more and more students

feel that "an individual can do little to change society." Indeed, this finding reached a ten-hear high of 33.6 percent (Higher Education Research Institute, [1996], p. 1).

One explanation for college students' disengagement from politics is that they did not have a chance to confront their potential roles as citizens prior to college. Since the UCLA study measured the attitudes only of entering first-year college students, it did not address the attitudes of upper-division students who might have developed an interest in politics and public life as a result of their college educational experiences. To be sure, a college education reinforces the notion that one has a duty to participate, if only through voting in periodic elections.

There is another explanation, however, for young people's apparent civic disengagement. One political scientist believes that many young Americans have virtually no sense of civic duty or societal obligation. They "regard themselves solely as the clientele of government" (Markus, 1992a) and demand rights without responsibilities. It is this view that has led some to call this generation of youth the "Me generation."

Indeed, several recent studies provide support for this grim conclusion. For example, a 1989 People for the American Way study conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates found:

1. Young people cherish America's freedoms without understanding what it takes to preserve them;
2. This generation is—by its own admission and in the eyes of teachers—markedly less involved and less interested in public life than previous generations;
3. Institutions with the best opportunity to teach young people citizenship—family, school and government—have let them down (People for the American Way, 1989, pp. 12–13).

A 1990 Times Mirror Study found that "today's young Americans, aged eighteen to thirty, know less and care less about news and public affairs than any other generation of Americans in the past fifty years." The authors of this study labeled this generation of youth as "the age of indifference" (Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, 1990, p. 1 [press release]).

Previous generations of young people have surely been preoccupied with personal concerns such as individual happiness and career success. Indeed, these two goals are often linked by the importance of making enough money to provide for one's family and to pursue a variety of materialistic pleasures. But there is a sense that the present generation of youth is more preoccupied with career goals and making money than previous generations. It may well be that today's students perceive that they face numerous pressures stimulated by a changing and more unfriendly economy, changes that could mean that the

young may not be able to achieve the kind of material well-being of their parents and grandparents. The headlines of the early 1990s reminded students of the difficult job market: "Economic Trend for the 90s: Fear"; "Middle-Class and Jobless, They Share Sorrows"; "Graduates March Down Aisle into Job Nightmare"; and "Pay of College Graduates Is Outpaced by Inflation" (Sidel, 1994, p. 52). As a result of these economic pressures, much of America's youth embraces the kind of radical individualism discussed in Chapter 2.

The most exhaustive recent study of college students' views was conducted in 1992–1993 by the Harwood Group for the Kettering Foundation. First-year and upper-division students on ten college campuses from across the country were brought together in ten discussion focus groups and asked to explore the following questions:

1. What do college students believe it means to be a citizen?
2. How do college students view politics today?
3. How have college students come to learn what they know about politics and citizenship?
4. How would college students like to see politics practiced?
5. What opportunities do college students see for learning politics at the university? (Harwood Group, 1993, p. xvi)

The strength of this study is that it goes far beyond merely reporting what students think about politics, but instead explores *why* they hold certain political views and *how* they think about politics.

In addressing these broader issues, the Kettering study offered three main findings. The first was that "many students have concluded that politics is irrelevant" (Harwood Group, 1993, p. 2). Students in this study held a narrow conception of politics and identified three basic ways that they might participate in the American political system—all rooted in individual action. Students perceived that they could participate by voting and signing petitions, by joining interest groups or by protesting, though they saw little value in any of these three forms. In light of this evidence, the researchers concluded that "the politics of pessimism" best captures the mood of students today.

A second and more hopeful conclusion was that "students can imagine a different politics." For many of the students interviewed, this different politics would be rooted in bringing people together at the community level to "find ways to talk and act on problems." In this way, politics would be more engaging to the average citizen. But students also recognize that the way U.S. politics was practiced today did not correspond to this alternative vision.

Finally, the study found that "students say that they are not learning to practice politics." They offered a specific indictment of political education at the collage level because campus conversations reinforced "everything that they

believe to be wrong with politics." More specifically, campus discussions of politics tended to be far too polarized (Harwood Group, 1993, p. 2). A Wake Forest student provided evidence to support this claim: "People are very opinionated in my classes. There is no moderation at all and [the discussion] gets totally out of bounds." A related problem is that when people take such strident positions both inside and outside the classroom, it is difficult to discuss possible solutions to the problems at hand. As a result, these heated arguments have little relevance for addressing major policy concerns. One Morgan State student concluded: "There are no solutions discussed; it is all rhetoric" (p. vii).

In sum, this study revealed that many students were alienated from politics and not particularly hopeful about the future. It is little wonder, then, that despite the increase in voter turnout among college-age youth in the 1992 presidential election, voter turnout among the young falls far below the national average. The students' views echoed the attitudes of the citizens interviewed for *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America,* a study prepared by the Harwood Group (1991) for the Kettering Foundation and discussed earlier in this chapter. At the same time, however, there are some key differences between the two studies.

The first is that whereas "citizens are frustrated, students feel resigned." The 1991 study found that Americans were angry abut politics because they perceived that they had been "pushed out" of the political process. Students, in contrast, "seem resigned to the conclusion that politics is what it is, that politics always has been this way, and that it may always be something that has little relevance to their lives" (Harwood Group, 1993, p. 3).

A second key difference is that whereas "citizens are seeking to reengage in politics, students see little purpose in ever becoming engaged." At least citizens claimed that they desperately wanted to be more involved in meaningful ways in the political process, but they could not find the appropriate place to participate. College students were so convinced that politics did not solve real problems that they saw no real reason to participate (Harwood Group, 1993, p. 3).

The respective studies also pointed out that whereas "citizens argue that politics should be different, students seem to be missing a context for thinking about politics." It is interesting that citizens recognized that the current conditions that shaped the political process should be different, but students accepted them as the norm. It was "only when they are given the opportunity to imagine a new set of political practices do they see possibilities for change" (Harwood Group, 1993, p. 3).

Finally, whereas "citizens have a strong sense of civic duty, students see primarily entitlement." Citizens believed that for the political process to work effectively, they had to participate. In this sense, they perceived that they were a key part of the political process. Students, however, conceptualized citizen-

ship "almost exclusively in terms of individual rights." They saw little connection, then, between citizenship and politics.

It is indeed disturbing that young people today appear to be so indifferent toward and alienated from politics. But if the Kettering study of college students reveals anything hopeful for the future it is this:

> This study suggests college students will engage in politics, but only if it is a different kind of politics—one that challenges them to learn new political skills and provides opportunities to put those skills to use. More "politics as usual" will only deepen their sense of the irrelevance of the political process (Harwood Group, 1993, p. 53).

It is also worth emphasizing that college students perceived that the educational process failed to provide them with meaningful and alternative ways to conceive of politics and to become involved in decisions of import on their campuses and in the larger society. Chapter 6 will devote considerable attention to exploring alternative models for conceptualizing how colleges and universities might restructure their general curricula to take into account the concerns that college students identified in the Kettering study. In the meantime, we need to discuss in greater detail the evidence for the rise in citizen activism.

Sources of Citizen Activism

The study *Main Street America* (Harwood Group, 1991) found that the key to citizen participation by those who actually participated was the possibility of change, not the certainty of success. If this study is at all accurate, then Americans can overcome participation obstacles if they perceive that their participation may have a meaningful effect—"that there is some opportunity to create and witness change." One woman offered this realistic observation: "You just keep trying. That doesn't mean that you will win all the time." The possibility of change thus becomes an important force for actually reconnecting citizens and politics (Mathews, 1994, p. 36).

Those who subscribe to the democratic theory of elitism believe that citizens have little interest in politics, have minimal knowledge of what is happening politically, and fail to participate because they perceive that the system is working well enough as it is. But those who embrace the more participatory democratic perspective challenge the civic-indifference notion by identifying various ways that citizens have attempted to become more meaningfully involved politically in their respective communities. Citizens do care and they struggle in all sorts of ways to find opportunities to have their voices heard in decisions at all levels of government that impinge on their lives.

The *Main Street America* study revealed that citizens wanted more meaningful public dialogue around key public policy concerns. Citizens identified

three specific problems with politics as usual: "the way the political agenda is set, the way policy issues are framed, and the limited opportunities for public deliberation." Citizens were particularly vocal about the way that the public agenda was set in American politics. A woman from Texas said, "The issues that policymakers jump, on the bandwagon and carry on about aren't really the issues that deal with mainstream people" (Mathews, 1994, p. 43). What citizens want to avoid is the kind of polarization of emotional issues in public discourse, such as abortion and school prayer, that E. J. Dionne contends is a major factor in why so many Americans hate politics.

The study found that many of the citizens who expressed helplessness about the political process participated in their communities "in many ways and with great intensity of purpose." Their involvement takes a number of different forms—membership in neighborhood organizations, crime-watch groups, school committees, and ad hoc bodies that have been formed to address specific problems in the community. At the same time that voter turnout has been in decline, we have witnessed an explosion of citizen activism. During the past three decades, more Americans have become involved in an array of grass-roots citizen groups such as ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), OPIC (Ohio Public Interest Campaign), and Clean Water Action. These organizations are increasingly playing a more active role in local policy debates and decisions. *Main Street America* concluded that citizens were involved in these ways because they believed that their participation could make a difference and that there was a direct connection between their actions and possible policy solutions (Harwood Group, 1991). As we will discuss later in this book, participation in these citizen organizations is one element of the New Citizenship.

College students, too, have shown renewed attention to broader community concerns and issues of social justice. A wider variety of community service programs and student literacy programs have spread across college campuses as students yearn for the opportunity to make a connection between what goes on in the classroom and the larger communities in which they live. A number of campuses, such as Colby College, LeMoyne College, the University of Minnesota, Providence College, Rutgers University, Stanford University, Syracuse University, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges, have begun to offer specific courses that require some form of community service. We will devote considerable attention to these course offerings and their connection to broader issues of democracy, citizenship, and difference in Chapter 6.

Like their counterparts in the 1960s, today's progressive students protest acts of social injustice around issues of racial, gender, and sexual discrimination. When President Bush built up American troops in the Middle East during the summer and fall of 1990 as a prelude to the Persian Gulf War, college students

organized antiwar protests. Indeed, my own campus, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, had one of the first college antiwar rallies in November 1990.

To be sure, what separates this generation of college students from their 1960s peers is the presence of outspoken conservative voices on many campuses and in the classroom who attack their more progressive colleagues and college faculty supporters as kowtowing to "political correctness." This often contributes to the polarized climate and discourse in the classroom and in the broader college community that students lamented in the Harwood study. At the same time, the rise of community service programs and discussion of highly charged political issues such as race, gender, class, and sexuality concerns on college campuses indicate an interest on the part of students who wish to link their courses of study with public policy solutions to current issues. This, too, is a central element of the New Citizenship and a source of optimism as we consider the ways citizens can be more meaningfully connected to the American political system.

Conclusion

This chapter has emphasized the importance of conceptualizing political participation far more broadly than mere participation in periodic elections. The right to vote may well be the central element of any democracy, but if that is the case, American voting-turnout rates suggest that the nation is characterized by civic indifference. Indeed, those who do vote in elections are overwhelmingly from the upper and middle classes, thus reinforcing the class bias in American politics.

Several studies of the electorate point out that many citizens are apathetic and uninterested in "politics as usual," which they perceive is dominated by special interests and closed to meaningful participation by the average citizen. At the same time, these studies suggest that Americans wish to have more meaningful opportunities to participate in the political system.

America's youth mirror and reinforce the political indifference of the larger society. If anything, the young are less well informed and less inclined to participate in mainstream electoral politics. College students, however, appear to be more likely to vote than American youth as a whole. These same students report that they are increasingly disgusted by the popularized discourse in the larger society and on college campuses as well.

There is reason for optimism, however. At all levels of society, citizens wish to expand their sense of civic responsibility. In other words, citizens wish to go beyond voting and participate meaningfully in decisions that will affect the quality and direction of their lives in both their communities and their workplaces.

It is this desire for public participation that is at the core of the New Citizenship. For us to fully understand the elements of the New Citizenship, we must place our discussion in its proper historical context by looking at the political movements and community organizations of the 1960s that were rooted in a broader vision of citizenship associated with the participatory democratic tradition. After examining the legacy of these movements, particularly the Civil Rights movement, one can more meaningfully discuss and evaluate contemporary proposals for increasing citizen involvement in public life. It is not enough, however, merely to discuss the political movements growing out of the 1960s. Indeed, if the central dilemma of this book is how can a polity strike a balance between the varieties of political participation engaged in by its citizens, then I must also address contemporary organizations of both the Left and the Right whose approach to politics potentially threatens overall system stability.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND STUDY

1. What does "normative" mean?
2. Rimmerman compares two theories of democracy: "participatory democracy" and "elitism." Define each and describe the difference.
3. Which theory (from question 2) does Rimmerman hold superior? Who are the chief proponents of the other theory?
4. From your discussion of your friends' and relatives' attitudes toward politics, which you examined in the Bennett reading, would you agree with Rimmerman that Americans feel they have little effective voice in their government?
5. Does the system Madison describes in the *Federalist 10* control the evil effects of factions (the oppression of one group by another) or limit participation to the few? Both? Neither?
6. Judging from your exploration of your friends' and family's attitudes in the Bennett reading, would you say, as Rimmerman does, that American values of individualism do not include obligation to the community or require participation in politics? Give examples.
7. How have you heard the political activism of the 1960s described by family, friends, and teachers?
8. What is the difference between conventional politics and participatory politics?
9. What examples of participatory democracy do you see around you, both on campus and off? Is this evidence for or against Rimmerman's claim about the attitudes of the citizens today, and the young people in particular?
10. Can you describe differences in political involvement (or sense of obligation) in terms of Allport's theory? Use the concepts of reference group and social distance to help.