Intergenerational Civic Learning

A Path Toward Revitalized Democracy

By Ruby Belle Booth

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Introduction

U.S. politics in the 21st century is defined by division: polarization, culture wars, a fast-moving and ideologically driven news ecosystem, and social media platforms that proliferate extremism and misinformation. As Americans struggle to achieve social cohesion and tackle the problems the country faces, a narrative of a civic crisis has arisen. In the face of threats to our systems of democracy, there has been a call for a bottom-up solution: revitalized civic education and engagement. The argument is that an educated, engaged, and active citizenry can begin to heal the divisions riddling our society.

Frustrations about our political system have sometimes appeared as an antagonistic relationship between generations. Older generations latch on to narratives of Millennials and Generation Z as spoiled, lazy, and oversensitive, judging today's youth on the basis of a "Back in my day . . ." nostalgia and discounting the unique challenges that young people face in 21st-century America.[1] For their part, these younger generations sum up their resentment of preceding ones in the dismissive quip "OK, Boomer," using humor to critique the traditional — and, to them, antiquated — worldviews associated with Baby Boomers and, to some extent, Generation X.

Neither side of this generational divide is the monolith the other paints it to be, yet these caricatures are perpetuated throughout popular culture and media. Rather than working to create a mutually beneficial civil society and change a political system that fails to meet the needs of youth and adults alike, Americans have turned their frustrations against one another. Distracted by generational conflict, we miss the opportunity to leverage intergenerational interactions for civic repair.

These tensions contribute to the present civic crisis often being discussed through a generational lens, with each side pointing at the other to assign blame and responsibility for providing remedies. Young people are simultaneously accused of being disengaged and too disruptive in their engagement, while older people's often traditional means of civic engagement and conventional worldviews are perceived to result in stasis. Many scholars and professionals advocate renewed focus on and increased investment in K–12 civic education as a solution, schools being the most obvious place to develop a more engaged citizenry. Supporting formal civic education — especially in the face of legislation restricting teaching about American government and history — is critical in developing young people's civic behavior. However, such a solution to the civic crisis leaves out large swaths of the population, namely adults whose civic skills have atrophied or need renewal.

Perhaps, in fact, our stunted view of civic learning — relegating most civic development to formal education — is contributing to this national crisis. There is a myth in the United States that by the time you can vote, you are a fully developed civic agent, having received all the training necessary to participate in our democracy. Yet it is fanciful to imagine that 20th-century high school social studies classes have fully equipped adults with the civic knowledge and skills they need to tackle modern America, where economic, technological, social, and demographic changes have radically rewritten how national politics functions. The reality is that civic learning must be a lifelong endeavor if our systems of democracy are to be revitalized. In other words, to avert a deepening of our civic crisis, adults need civic learning, too.

Civic learning extends beyond mastering concrete facts about government; it also requires the acquisition and development of civic skills and dispositions. Civic skills include both actions by which we participate in our democratic society — such as voting, contacting government officials, evaluating news sources, and researching issues — and more subtle skills like argumentation, deliberation, collaborative decision-making, and connecting across differences. Civic dispositions are the values and mindsets that foster civic participation, including a commitment to the common good, an understanding of the power of one's own voice in a democratic system, and a willingness to work with others toward shared goals. Each of these factors needs routine maintenance after we exit formal education. As our position in society, self-conception, and access to resources change, so must our civic development. Likewise, as the political environment around us changes, as it does every day, we always have more to learn. Already, much of the formal and informal civic learning happening in America is intergenerational in nature. Leaning into this is a potentially powerful way to facilitate lifelong civic learning that is rooted in personal experience and responsive to community change.

Intergenerationality describes contact between generations. Sometimes the word is narrowly defined to mean interaction between two generations, often separated by one generation (e.g., a grandparent and grandchild). Those using this definition sometimes place it in contrast

to *multigenerational* interactions, which take place among more than two generations (e.g., a child, parent, and grandparent). Defining intergenerationality as existing among people of all generations, no matter their distance, allows an expanded view of the concept that is critical for building a civic culture for all ages.

Civic intergenerationality is an approach to civic learning grounded in coming together across the life span to create a social and political reality that supports people of all ages. It operates under the assumption that all people are assets to our community, are capable of civic learning, and would benefit from it. By embracing the practice of civic intergenerationality, we can address America's ongoing civic crisis. We can create a community of lifelong, reciprocal learners that uplifts our youngest civic agents while leveraging the experiences and wisdom of older generations.

Not only can generations — young and old alike — use their unique expertise to share civic knowledge and skills with one another, but the very act of intergenerational communication requires participants to exercise civic skills and dispositions. Working together across generational lines helps individuals develop mutual respect, communication skills, collaboration, and power sharing. It also has been shown to increase generativity — a feeling of responsibility toward the well-being of future generations — and a sense of community while decreasing generational stereotypes that drive societies apart.[2] Through intergenerational contact, communities can increase the social capital associated with collective civic action while facilitating valuable civic learning.[3] Civic intergenerationality offers exciting pathways for civic learning across ages, turning it into a lifelong process rather than something isolated in K–12 education or during election seasons.

To begin to map the promise of civic intergenerationality, this paper first looks at the differences in how generations approach social and political life, including the issues they care about and civic tactics they engage in. The next section outlines three theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing the learning that takes place through civic intergenerationality: direction of learning, type of relationship, and learning outcome. Within each, certain models offer particularly effective forms of civic intergenerationality. Using these frameworks, the third section examines intergenerational learning on the issue of climate change, and the fourth section examines the particular ways this mode of learning takes place in immigrant households. The report concludes by examining how intergenerational contact is already being used in the civic space and how families, organizations, and communities can harness its power.

Defining Generations

Generation is an amorphous concept; defining where one ends and another begins can be done in a variety of ways. Education scholar Greg Mannion outlines several approaches: one's generation can be defined by one's place within a family structure, by the social groups one belongs to, or by formative life experiences one shares with others born at a similar time. Each individual's generational identity is an assemblage of these familial, social, and cohort or chronological positions, and their significance varies depending on social setting.[4] The labels most often used to refer to different generations are chronological or cohort categories.[5]

>> Silent Generation
Birth years: 1928–1945

>> Baby Boomer Generation
Birth years: 1946–1964

>> Generation X
Birth years: 1965–1980

>> Millennial Generation (Generation Y)
Birth years: 1981–1996

>> Generation Z
Birth years: 1997–2010

Generational Differences in Civic Engagement

To imagine how people could come together across generations for civic betterment, it is critical to understand the different ways in which the generations are civically engaged. These differences stem in part from the values that each generation holds, which are often shaped by the shared life experiences that form generational cohorts. These values then heavily influence the issues generations are passionate about and how they engage with those issues. Generational differences can also arise in reaction to changing social, political, and economic circumstances or can be inherent in the different life stages of younger and older adults.

For example, younger generations connect less with traditional ideas of American patriotism. In 2019, a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll examined the differences in values between generations. Forty-two percent of Americans ages 18–38 said that patriotism is "very important," compared with 80 percent of those 55 and older.[6] This de-emphasis of patriotism among younger people doesn't mean that they aren't patriotic; a 2021 *Economist*/YouGov poll found that about two-thirds of 18- to 44-year-olds consider themselves patriotic, with more of the older part of this group (30–44 years old) identifying as very patriotic. Those 45 and older reported still higher levels of patriotism, with 92 percent of people 65 and older saying they are patriotic.[7] Older generations are also prouder to be an American, are more likely to believe in American exceptionalism, and have more pride in the American flag. While patriotism may be especially notable in terms of generational division, Americans are less divided over other values, such as hard work, community involvement, and tolerance for others. The majority of every age group supported these values, pointing to their potentially unifying power.[8]

The way individuals choose to be civically engaged is shaped by their views of the government, media, and other institutions. As they have become adults, Millennials have shown a lack of connection to traditional social institutions, including political parties and organized religion.[9] In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 42 percent of Millennials identified themselves as independents, while 35 percent of Gen X, 30 percent of Baby Boomers, and 35 percent of the Silent Generation said they were untethered to a political party.[10] Different generations also trust institutions differently; older generations show more trust in the military, the police, and religious and business leaders.[11] In a June 2020 poll, only 8 percent of young people (ages 18–29) claimed to trust the police "a great deal," while 56 percent reported no trust or just "a little." Even 30- to 44-year-olds reported greater trust in the police, with 20 percent trusting them a great deal. Trust increased with age up to those 65 and older, 36 percent of whom trusted the police a great deal.[12]

These differences in patriotism and trust in institutions are reflected in the different approaches younger and older people favor to address the problems America faces. While the majority of both older and younger generations agree that the country is "off track," they disagree about the best way to get things under control. One poll found that less than one-quarter of 18- to 29-year-olds see "law and order" as the best approach to right the direction of our country, whereas 45 percent of those 65 and older see this as the way forward. The majority of all generations see the alternative of "bringing people together" as a solution, but while this was favored by 77 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds, only 55 percent of those 65 and older selected this option. This aligns with the less traditionalist tendencies of the youngest adults, 78 percent of whom said that openness to changes in national traditions would make America better. Among all older generations, 43 percent to 61 percent agreed.[13]

Younger generations largely don't perceive a lack of trust in government to be a major problem. They are not as likely as older adults to be concerned about threats like partisan deadlock in Washington and the influence of lobbyists on government, indicating less worry about issues pertaining to traditional politics.[14]

Because each generation generally holds a different view of the best possible solutions for improving the country, there are also differences in the approaches that individuals take to their civic engagement: older people prioritize more traditional forms of political engagement, while younger people are more likely to operate outside formal institutions.

Reactions to the demonstrations against police brutality following George Floyd's murder in May 2020 highlight this division in practice. Both within the Black community and among the population at large, different viewpoints during this period highlight how one's attitude toward established institutions can influence approaches to activism. A survey by Yahoo! News and YouGov in June 2020 showed that even though 60 percent of Americans across all ages believe structural racism exists in the United States generally and in policing in particular, they

differ in the tactics they see as acceptable in fighting it. The majority of Americans, across all ages and races, identified registering and voting en masse as the best way that "African-Americans can achieve a better break for themselves." However, 42 percent of young people (ages 18–29) advocated protesting, compared with just 14 percent of 45- to 64-year-olds and 3 percent of those 65 and older.[15] Older generations' emphasis on electoral politics as a solution, rather than the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, aligns with their tendency to place greater value on institutions. As discussed above, older generations also have a more favorable view of police officers and a tendency to support law-and-order approaches to civic problems.

Within the Black community, young activists leading the Black Lives Matter movement have shown a departure from the tactics of the civil rights movement of the 20th century, seeing its strategies as antiquated and inadequate. The Black Lives Matter movement often rejects respectability politics, seeking liberation from a system of oppression rather than inclusion in that same system. The decentralized power structures of the movement are unfamiliar to the activists of the 1960s, who see young activists as failing to have clear goals and demands.[16] These divisions reflect not only the changing challenges faced by Black Americans but also the different values held by each generation.

Surprisingly, however, patriotism can be used as a frame for justifying certain types of civic engagement for all generations. The 2021 *Economist*/YouGov poll found that more than two-thirds of each age group see participating in peaceful protests for racial equality to be patriotic, with those 65 and over having the highest rate of affirmative answers (78 percent). Young people were the least likely to say that peaceful protest is patriotic (62 percent), and they also were less likely than older generations to say that civil disobedience is patriotic. However, for both questions, there were more young people who responded that they were "unsure," suggesting how these poll results may be impacted by young people's lack of life experience or their lack of identification with patriotism as a guiding principle.[17]

These generational differences also model how civic engagement changes over time. Because of advances in technology, the ways in which digital natives — like Gen Z and to some extent Millennials — find connection and community are vastly different from the ways of previous generations. Younger generations are much more likely to turn to online spaces for both social connections and civic engagement.[18] In fact, 62 percent of Gen Z has been found to believe that their voice holds more power on the internet than off.[19] Many older adults, who use the internet in vastly different ways, do not keep pace with the rapid evolution of younger generations' media use. Young activists sometimes say that their parents and other older adults don't see time spent online as serious when, in reality, the online space is the locus of a significant amount of youth organizing.[20]

Like other forms of identity, including race, party affiliation, and class, age can be indicative of the stance an individual holds on certain issues. Younger generations tend to be more liberal, which is reflected in their beliefs on issues such as immigration, same-sex marriage, marijuana legalization, climate change, and racial justice.[21] While opinions on many of these issues tend to split along partisan lines, differences within parties demonstrate generational influences. Within the Republican Party, for instance, members of younger generations depart from typical party beliefs on issues like climate change, and they are more likely to favor alternative energy, criticize government inaction, and believe that climate change has anthropogenic causes.[22]

Information gathering is a critical aspect of civic engagement; it is how we become informed on topics and processes that we need to know about in order to be engaged citizens. A survey conducted in 2018 found that one-third of Americans claimed to spend two hours a day on political activities, but 80 percent of them exclusively use this time to consume news or talk about it with their family and friends.[23] Given that this is such a prominent way for people to identify their political involvement, it becomes an important proxy for people's civic engagement. Age has been shown to be predictive of whether people "very closely" follow politics in election years, with younger generations falling into this category significantly less than older ones.[24] This trend has remained constant over the 16 years Gallup has asked the question, suggesting that it may be a consequence of the stage of life an individual is in, rather than a difference between generational cohorts.

Younger adults reported following news about the Covid-19 pandemic less than older adults, but they paid the same amount of attention to the protests after the murder of George Floyd as did older adults, except for those 65 or older, who paid the most attention. For both Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests, young adults were far more critical of how the topics were presented by the media; in particular, young Democrats departed from older members of their party in this critique, showing another place where age-related values overpower party affiliation.[25]

Younger generations get news from a greater variety of platforms, especially from online news sources and social media. This sort of multiplatform news gathering is positively linked with offline group associations, online participation, and protesting.[26] This is unsurprising given research on younger Americans' use of social media as a tool for finding news and the mismatch of traditional news sources with the lifestyles and media environment of younger adults. Much like their difficulty conceptual-

izing the internet as a tool for civic engagement, older adults have a hard time understanding how younger generations use social media for information gathering and sharing.[27]

Younger Americans report preferring the *New York Times* and NPR over most of the cable and network television news sources that older generations prefer.[28] Generations also hold different values about what makes a news source trustworthy; younger adults find cited evidence, fact-checking, and transparency about reporting practices and funding to be more important than do older generations. Though members of older generations also find those attributes important, they are more likely than younger generations to view an outlet's perceived neutrality and reputation, as well as that of specific journalists, as very important.[29] This aligns with older generations' tendency to value institutions.

It is from these many differences that stereotypes arise on both sides of the generational divide. Young people are positioned as dependent on technology and uninterested in societal life, civic slackers whose use of the internet for news consumption and social connections erodes the civic fabric of our democracy. This picture of young people is belied by extensive research and reporting on how young Americans' activism propels movements for racial justice, gun violence prevention, and action on climate change to center stage and toward political success. Paradoxically, those who do perceive young people this way place a different kind of burden on them when they pronounce that "Gen Z will save us." Mean-while, young activists often report feeling as if their youth is slipping away as they face mounting pressure to balance both lofty expectations and critical stereotypes, all while going through a period of development and change.

On the other hand, older generations are seen as too dependent on the civic engagement activities of the past. These older generations desire changes grounded in the institutions and values of the America they grew up in, which may explain their higher voter turnout and tendency to favor political solutions. However, in cases such as the civil rights movement, the often institutionally focused activism of previous generations paved the way for work done by younger activists.

Both the differences and the similarities that exist across generations can be the basis of civic learning. Rather than criticizing others for their values and beliefs, working together can help foster a mutual understanding of the differences in life experiences that have led generations to have fundamentally different views. And while younger generations may be motivated more by equity and other progressive values and older generations place greater value on patriotism and institutions, they can find common ground in the sorts of changes they want to see in the United States. Even if an intergenerational conversation doesn't change either side's opinion, there is still a great deal of civic learning and comity that can occur. The very act of civil discourse and deliberation is valuable in and of itself. If we approach these intergenerational conversations with mutual civility, we increase the likelihood that further learning will occur.

Theoretical Frameworks Informing Civic Intergenerationality

Intergenerational theory, as described by developmental psychologist Karen VanderVen, draws a framework for scholars and practitioners working in intergenerational programming. While her work isn't explicitly focused on learning, it contains important insights on tensions within intergenerational work that can readily be applied. VanderVen highlights the importance of both the relationship and the activity in yielding developmental outcomes, as well as the way these two factors are co-constitutive, meaning they are interdependent and influence each other. She calls for a greater emphasis on the complex systems within which these relationships exist, acknowledging that these relationships are neither linear nor simple but shift in different circumstances.

There are areas where VanderVen's theory departs from the concept of intergenerational civic learning; our theory is less driven by dyadic relationships, and the outcomes of the work extend beyond traditional developmental outcomes. That being said, VanderVen's emphasis on the developmental needs of all ages and the way in which intergenerational contact can nurture and serve people across the life span provides a guide to the care required in creating spaces that support people of all ages.[30]

Beyond VanderVen's theory, which stems from the fields of education and child development, scholarship on intergenerational contact and learning is found across many disciplines, each offering a unique focus and method of inquiry. An examination of these multidisciplinary approaches reveals three important frames for thinking about the subject: *direction of learning*, *type of relationship*, and *learning outcome*. Civic intergenerationality can occur in a range of environments, each bringing its own context and challenges. Within each of the themes outlined in this section, certain approaches to intergenerational contact will yield different forms of civic learning, in both kind and scale. By examining these dimensions, we can develop a model of civic intergenerationality that accounts for the difficulties stemming from intergenerational contact.

Directionality

Though research has long focused on the ways in which adults influence young people, movements in the fields of psychology and youth development are now pushing for developmental models that recognize the agency that young people have in shaping their own lives and worldviews. This shift in the scholarship began in the 1990s, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which entered into force in 1990, is often cited, suggesting that changing views on youth rights and agency internationally acted as a significant catalyst for this movement in research.[31] The primary focus of past research has been the top-down unidirectional model of learning, dominant both in formal education systems and in family structures. Broadened conceptions of intergenerational knowledge transfer now include trickle-up unidirectionality, co-learning, and a more complex systems model, which acknowledges the dynamic reciprocity present in many intergenerational interactions.

An *adult-to-youth unidirectional model* was long the primary way of conceptualizing intergenerational learning. This sort of transfer can happen intentionally, as in overt teaching, or unintentionally, as in the modeling of behavior. Illustrative examples of these types of learning can be found in parents' conversations with their children about race: often, parents of minority youth talk to their children about race and racism to prepare them for the future (an example of intentional, direct knowledge transfer), while white parents more often model behavior by not talking about race (an unintentional, indirect mode of teaching).[32]

This direction of learning is the one most studied within the family, often involving issues pertaining to political and civic life. Research has extensively outlined how young people with more politically engaged parents are more likely to engage in civic activities such as volunteering, speaking out online, or protesting. Notably, this relationship doesn't hold true for voting behaviors, possibly indicating that efforts to turn out young voters have successfully engaged youth across family backgrounds.[33] While this data offers evidence of top-down influence within families, it also shows that other inputs influence young people's civic engagement, pushing scholars to more closely examine where else young people develop their civic identities.

The *trickle-up direction of learning*, sometimes called the child effect in studies of families, describes learning that moves against typical age-based power imbalances, putting the younger participant in the role of teacher. This model offers an alternative to past scholarship positing youth as a blank slate upon which a parent's political ideology is written and instead positions youth as active participants in their family's political development.[34] Once again, learning can be direct or indirect. Children's conversations and activities can indirectly prompt adults to seek out more information, or young people can directly teach parents new things.[35] This is common with digital media, because young people often have a different knowledge base around communications technologies that can impact how adults engage with them.[36] To date, this learning mechanism has been best documented by communications and media studies scholars.

 Co-learning describes a situation in which people across generations gather on a more even footing to learn together. This type of intergenerational learning ideally operates outside of age-based power structures, allowing all participants to learn without judgment and bring their own expertise to a learning community.[37] Inherent in this type of learning are the important civic skills of collaboration and communication, which require generations to work together for their mutual benefit.

Finally, there is a *systems* understanding of intergenerational learning. Studied mostly in the context of the family, this way of conceptualizing intergenerational learning acknowledges the importance of reciprocity. Perhaps the model best suited to civic intergenerationality, it combines both unidirectional models as well as co-learning to describe a system in which each party has something to offer and can both learn and teach reciprocally. It also encapsulates the complex indirect learning that can take place across generations, such as when a conversation prompts an individual to learn more about a topic independently or when the very act of communicating across generations reshapes approaches to future interactions. This understanding of intergenerational learning falls most squarely within VanderVen's theory, in which intergenerational contact involves "reciprocal transformation" and accounts for the complexities of context.[38]

Types of Relationships

Learning takes place in various ways across different types of intergenerational relationships. Every intergenerational encounter is governed by the power imbalances inherent in an age-divided society. Yet different relationships often include their own power dynamics, depending on the individuals' access to power within society and their relative power in the relationship. An obvious binary

arises out of the literature on intergenerational learning: familial and extrafamilial intergenerational encounters.

The first and most evident place where intergenerational learning occurs is within the family. Research has carefully documented the transfer of knowledge, behavior, and values that takes place within family structures across a range of topics, including civic engagement, voting behavior, and political beliefs. The family can offer a space for people of different generations to engage because of the close bonds inherent in many, though not all, family structures. Many adults see the children in their families as trustworthy and neutral, meaning that younger family members can help to teach parents about certain issues, including highly politicized or value-driven subjects like climate change or sexuality.[39] Yet the same connections that can ease learning within the family can also appear as rigid hierarchies that make reciprocal intergenerational learning challenging. Both power dynamics and family value systems shape the way in which political conversations occur within the family and the outcomes that follow, highlighting the challenge of speaking about "the family" as a monolithic location for intergenerational civic learning.[40]

Looking beyond the family, there are countless ways in which intergenerational contact can take place. Scholarship elucidates the challenges and benefits of a variety of these relationships, ranging from those that exist in formal education to those arising from community organizing environments. These intergenerational relationships can look like intergenerational government advisory councils, adult allyship in youth-led activism, or research partnerships to study topics that young people have more expertise in, such as sexting and cyberbullying.[41] Just as the family provides a unique set of dynamics that must be navigated for intergenerational communication, relationships in other contexts require participants to engage differently and will produce varying outcomes, some more civically focused than others. For instance, a service-learning program that brings together college students and older adults with the goal of combating loneliness and diminishing generational stereotypes will have civic outcomes different from those emerging from collaborative, intergenerational work on a community issue. As a result of the changing social infrastructure in the United States and the decline of clubs and associations that brought members of all ages together, this sort of intergenerational contact occurs less frequently than in the past. Civic intergenerationality requires a revival of this sort of extrafamilial civic life, one that is grounded in reciprocity, power sharing, and a systems understanding of intergenerational learning.

Types of Learning and Outcomes

Much like civic learning, there are many types of learning that can occur between generations. The transfer of *knowledge* is the most common and overt type. All generations and all individuals have funds of knowledge that can be shared with others. *Skills* can be transferred between generations in much the same way as knowledge, either by overtly teaching something (such as computer proficiency or political organizing) or by using them to engage with other generations (such as communicating across differences).

Intergenerational learning can also revolve around changes in *perceptions and worldview*. For instance, many programs focus on breaking down generational stereotypes. While this work is important for repairing civic divides, some scholars argue that this type of work diminishes the potential of intergenerational interactions to achieve more robust social change.[42]

Other research dives deeper into the intergenerational relationship itself to look at the *emotional and social support* that such a relationship can provide. For instance, youth development scholar Shawn Ginwright describes the healing that can take place when young people and adult mentors come together in Black activist environments. This itself can be a form of civic learning, as it can help people of all ages to cope with systems of oppression as they fight to reform them.[43]

With the wide range of learning that can take place in intergenerational relationships, the practice of intergenerationality lends itself to civic learning. There are opportunities for gaining civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions across the generations, and much of this learning occurs as a result of the intergenerational relationship itself.

Case Study: Climate Change and Environmental Learning

At the United Nations Climate Summit in 2019, Greta Thunberg, the youth climate movement's most visible figure, expressed her frustration that she had to be there rather than in school, lamenting, "You all come to us young people for hope." This sentiment, which is often expressed by activists in the youth-led climate movement, highlights the movement's difficulty in establishing a meaningful partnership with adults in decision-making positions and the lack of generativity, particularly in American culture.

The issue of climate change is inherently grounded in intergenerational relations. As a problem that all generations contribute to and that will shape the lives of current and future generations, it requires intergenerational learning and collaboration to reach a solution. Yet the issue of climate change has become deeply polarized, in part because of the way it is discussed by the media and by politicians. Although it is an existential social, economic, and public health crisis, it is treated as a partisan one, thereby posing challenges to catalyzing interest in and action on environmental issues and limiting the potential power of generativity in creating change.

Intergenerational environmental learning has great potential to help depolarize the issue and incentivize governmental action. There are differences in how adults and young people take in information about climate change that prime the topic for trickle-up intergenerational learning. When adults receive new information about climate change, it can sometimes entrench them deeper in their ideological beliefs. Children, on the other hand, accept information about climate change more neutrally and from a less ideological standpoint, often not even adopting the viewpoints of their parents or teachers.[44] This may be the root of the generational differences that exist across ideological divides in beliefs about climate change.[45] These differences can be harnessed, however, to foster climate concern through intergenerational learning. Because children and youth are often seen as trusted sources, especially within the family, they can effectively impart their often more current knowledge of climate change.[46]

This model of bottom-up environmental learning has been tested largely in school-based interventions that intentionally center intergenerational communication. One study looked at school assignments about environmental issues that included parental interviews; another examined the effect of public-facing activities in which elementary schoolers led a town hall meeting and produced climate-related public service messages.[47] These interventions were found to impact adults in a variety of

ways. Increased discussion about climate change in the family led to changes in views — especially among men and conservatives, who are among the groups that are hardest to reach with climate communication.[48] And young people's public-facing work was found to inspire adults and make them want to facilitate the young people's further engagement and growth. The study showed that children can act as leaders on the issue of climate change in historically adult-dominated spaces and that adults, including government officials, are open to listening to young people on the topic.[49]

However, although the latter experiment showed the potential power of youth voices, it also emphasized the difference between adults acknowledging youth leadership and actually learning from them. The biggest takeaways for the adults were about the young people's activism, not about the topic at hand. The power advantages that adults hold in the social order can lead them to resist being educated by young people, as evinced by this study. Much of the climate movement is youth led, so the question that remains is how to motivate older generations not merely to be excited about young people's engagement and supportive of their climate activism but to hear what they are saying, learn from them, and take action.[50]

These two studies, as well as others with similar findings, highlight the potential for young people to act as information leaders on the topic of climate change. It also indicates the power of conversations within the family to change views on climate change. For intergenerational learning to occur outside the family, older generations must be open to receiving knowledge from younger ones. Including young people and adults in projects that put them on an even playing field through a systems or co-learning approach to intergenerational environmental learning can help to uplift youth voices and foster education.[51]

While adults in positions of power may value young people's leadership, young climate activists are often frustrated by the lack of concrete action they see, even from

outspoken advocates of their work. A survey of 10,000 young people across 10 countries found that 65 percent believed the government to be failing them. The study highlighted the sense of betrayal that young people feel on the issue of climate change, with only 31 percent thinking that governments can be trusted.[52] The U.S. government is designed to limit young voices, with its age restrictions on holding office and participating in elections, as well as its attentiveness to resource-laden individuals and business interests. Until government bodies institutionalize young people in positions of power, intergenerational learning will be a primary means to propel the climate movement forward.

Starting in the family appears to be a strategic first step in generating climate concern, a case in point being a GOP congressman who changed his steadfast beliefs at his son's urging.[53] If parents can see young family members as experts on the topic, they should be able to extend this view toward other young people, broadening their acceptance of youth as trusted leaders. However, for young people to have influence as educators within the family, there must be a family dynamic or context that allows them to step into the role of expert and be listened to. By reframing climate change through the lens of family and community generativity rather than politics, intergenerational interactions can foster constructive dialogue and civic learning.

Taking an intergenerational approach to teaching and learning about climate change shows the potential for a trickle-up direction of learning that conveys knowledge and contributes to an evolution of one's perception of an issue. The movement surrounding climate change has long been spearheaded by young people, so strengthening the unidirectional pathway of learning from younger generations to older generations both within the movement and elsewhere, such as within families, offers a great deal of promise in generating climate concern and deepening engagement on the topic. This is an example of how intergenerational learning centered around knowledge and skills can be transformed into sustained action for the greater good, indicating the close link between civic learning and action. It also highlights how schools can facilitate intergenerational learning by making it central to lesson plans.

Case Study: Reciprocal Learning in Immigrant Households

Much of the research about civic learning in the family presupposes a certain balance of knowledge between the parent and child; there is an assumption that the parents are American-born citizens and are therefore the experts in the family on the political institutions and systems of the United States.[54] However, not all families in the United States have the same distribution of knowledge. Researchers have shown how youth in immigrant families act as information or media brokers within the family, serving as bridges between their parents and American society. Looking at the civic practices of immigrant families in the United States models how reciprocal civic learning can take place in the family and the way those interactions are shaped by the broader communities the family inhabits.

Media brokering describes the way in which children and young people across many backgrounds often act as cross-generational experts on communications technologies, sharing their know-how as digital natives with older generations, which are more likely to lack such skills. Reciprocal learning often emerges out of these interactions, as children teach parents about technology, while parents use cultural knowledge to help children interpret and evaluate the media they are engaging with. In more affluent families, where parents are better versed in modern technologies, children are less likely to step into this role.[55]

This role of media broker can go even further in immigrant families, where children's education in American schools gives them greater knowledge of technology, American culture, and the English language than their parents have. Due to linguistic, technological, and social barriers, it is sometimes challenging for immigrants to feel integrated with their communities. Even accessing basic community resources and services, such as health clinics or nutritional assistance programs, can be difficult. Research, particularly on Latino immigrant communities, shows how children can serve as intermediaries between their parents and American institutions, through tasks like interpreting mail or booking a doctor's appointment.[56]

While media brokering can be an opportunity for learning, the experience isn't all positive, as young people are prematurely forced into adult responsibilities and often fear making a consequential mistake on the high-stakes medical, legal, and financial issues they assist their parents with.[57] One study found that young adults in immigrant families spend on average 15 hours a week helping their families, and although they may be learning valuable civic skills, such as how to connect with community resources and institutions, this time has a cost, as overburdened children clock many school absences and often sacrifice schoolwork to help their parents.[58]

In addition to helping their parents connect to their community, children of immigrants play a role in sharing news and civic information. Much of the Spanish-language media in the United States focuses little on social and political issues directly impacting the Latino community, such as immigration policy.[59] Many adult immigrants rely on these sources for their news, but their children have access to a wider array of sources because of their English-language skills and technological abilities, and therefore more information about news and current events. In some cases, this imbalance of knowledge leads to parents and children in Latino immigrant families not discussing political issues with one another.[60] In other instances, children explain news to their parents, with a focus on filling in details around the limited information their parents may have access to or offering different perspectives.[61] This provides an opportunity both for parents to learn about current events and for children to practice civic skills like explaining complex issues and describing a variety of viewpoints.

Immigrant families also practice a mutual exchange of civic information and attitudes. Among youth with two immigrant parents, political scientist Janelle Wong and psychologist Vivian Tseng found that 27 percent reported helping their parents be civically engaged by translating or explaining political information and documents, such as voting guides and ballots. In comparison, only 11 percent of youth with one or both parents born in the United States engaged in such behaviors. On the other hand, children with two immigrant parents learn less from their parents about U.S. politics — such as the three branches of government, how elections work, and topics like democracy and civil rights — than do children with one or two native-born parents. The one topic that children with two immigrant parents are more likely than other youth to have explained by their parents is immigration and naturalization, while these young people are

more likely to explain a range of other social and political issues to their parents than are other youth.[62] All of this suggests how important family context and background are in shaping the civic learning that takes place in families.

Nation of origin also plays an important role in molding the civic lives of immigrant families. In one interview, a child of immigrants from the Philippines explained that her parents have always had a strong grasp of the U.S. political system because of the United States' colonization of the Philippines.[63] In other families, country of origin can act as a barrier to political participation. For instance, immigrants who come from countries with oppressive governments or regimes that stifle political engagement can harbor prolonged government distrust, a lack of desire to engage in American politics, or a fear of doing so.[64] This can both influence their children's future engagement and close off opportunities for family dialogue that could lead to civic learning. Beyond that, some immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, fear civic engagement such as protesting because of possible legal repercussions. Again, this anxiety can hold back both the parents and their children or cause tensions between politically active children and their parents.[65]

With both news and civic information, children can learn from their parents' knowledge and lived experience, such as when younger family members explain something from American politics, and in exchange the parents teach them something about the politics and news of their country of origin.[66] This shows how learning can operate in a system, where one family member's talking about politics may prompt others to share their own expertise, leading to a reciprocal exchange of information.

In the case of media brokering and news sharing, parents and children have unique pools of knowledge that they bring to the interaction, allowing the reciprocal, reactive learning characteristic of the systems understanding of intergenerational learning. In some cases, immigrant families lean into this division of knowledge out of necessity. Although most families in the United States have members with unique pools of civic knowledge, learning may not arise as naturally when the division between these pools isn't so absolute. When differences in knowledge are framed as an asset to the family rather than a divide between generations, civic learning can take place.

One factor that influences how young people approach talking to their parents about important political issues is their own political socialization taking place outside the family. In addition to separate pools of knowledge, different generations within immigrant families often have different social networks, with children more reliant on school, online spaces, and their peers and parents more connected to their job, religious groups, and ethnic media sources.[67] Youth who have been politicized through activist community organizations have been found to be more likely to try to politicize their parents than peers who haven't engaged with such organizations. Young people who become more informed about American political processes and the potential of their own efficacy within those systems through activism are more likely to share such views with their parents, encouraging them to embrace political participation and the power of their own voice.[68] Much as with climate education, this exemplifies a trickle-up model of learning but suggests the need for a catalyst for that process. In research on the 2006 immigration reform protests, participants of all ages reported being encouraged by nonfamily members to participate and then going on to mobilize the rest of their family.[69]

All of these intrafamilial exchanges are predicated on a family dynamic that welcomes them. There are many families, immigrant and not, in which this sort of relationship does not exist. For direct intergenerational civic learning to happen within the family, parents and children must have healthy, positive relationships and regular contact, which is far from a reality for many people. Additionally, some children of immigrants report family dynamics that keep politics and family life separate or that prize family cohesion, which stops them from discussing current events with their parents.[70] The same dynamics can arise in other families and often shape whether, and how, those families engage with social and political issues.

Family dynamics constantly shift in interactions like these, particularly when children express greater agency. Although these examples show younger family members stepping into leadership positions within the family, this doesn't necessarily mean that parental authority or family hierarchies have been sacrificed. Vikki Katz, in her research on media brokering, outlined how parents maintained authority even as their children served them in the role of media broker.[71] However, Michael McDevitt and Mary Butler's work on the information leadership of Latino teens found that tensions arose out of the increased parity between parents and children as well as the increased gender equality resulting from information leadership.[72] This disagreement in the literature hints at the complicated family dynamics that shape and are reshaped by intergenerational interactions guided by nontraditional power dynamics. Whenever a child's authority within the family shifts, even if just for one question or phone call, the family must renegotiate its dynamic, sometimes resulting in changing power distributions and sometimes in a return to equilibrium.[73] Regardless, with information and news brokering, young people often recognize that their parents have their own knowledge and wisdom to contribute to the interaction.

Findings for Civic Learning and Engagement

While these two case studies highlight important possibilities and challenges of civic learning in intergenerational settings, they focus on a specific topic or subgroup. Other research has taken a broader look at intergenerational political learning and civic engagement.

First, researchers have studied civic intergenerationality within the family through the lens of political socialization, seeking to understand the reciprocal learning that takes place predominantly between parents and children. Research has carefully documented the ways in which young people influence their parents' continued political socialization as well as the political and communication dynamics of the entire family. This paper focuses more on the bottom-up approach to civic learning, from child to parent, because that is the sort of knowledge transfer most often neglected by researchers due to power imbalances. It is easy to argue that intergenerational learning is just young people learning from older people, but true partnerships respect the agency and expertise of each participant.

A quasi-experimental research study found that as young people learn about political issues in school and return home to discuss them, parents engage with these issues more deeply, increasing their news consumption, partisanship, opinions about elections, and likelihood of discussing political issues. Some of these shifts were especially strong in families of low socioeconomic status. Political conversations also see both parents and children practicing civic skills like listening, expression, and dialogue, as well as dispositions such as tolerance.[74] This research distills the various forms of civic learning that can arise both indirectly and directly as a result of conversations about politics within the family.

Another study tested three different directions of familial civic learning: reciprocal, top-down, and bottom-up. It found that young people's news use and their tendency to discuss political issues with their peers predicted subsequent parent–youth political discussion, showing how young people's political socialization can influence opportunities for civic learning within the family. In comparison with the quasi-experimental approach taken above, this research was done via a survey, with the caveat that it was not a nationally representative sample.[75] Researchers have also extensively studied how family communication patterns impact political discussion within the family, highlighting how different families will have different experiences of intergenerational civic learning.[76]

Second, practitioner-centric research that more closely analyzes one model of civic intergenerationality in the field, youth–adult partnership on civic projects, has also been carried out. The concept of youth–adult partnership arose primarily out of youth development theory as a way for those working in intergenerational programming to move away from youth-serving projects toward undertakings that are more reciprocal, with young people taking a position equal to that of adults.[77] This sort of programming requires a focus on issues, rather than age, as a basis for solidarity, mitigating the power that adults often can access as institutional representatives. (Even spaces crafted to be youth-powered or youth-focused often retain age-based hierarchy if they spring out of an adult-led institution, as adults' institutional position marginalizes young participants.)[78] Because youth–adult partnership is grounded in democratic practices and equitable participation, it allows young people and adults to come together and craft a vision of the future that is based on their separate lived experiences of the systems and communities they seek to change. It allows different generations to learn about the others' experiences and perspectives, ultimately resulting in documented benefits to participants of all ages and the broader community in which they are operating.[79]

The case studies and frameworks outlined throughout this paper highlight the ways in which intergenerationality and civic learning are a natural fit. Both can produce a range of outcomes, meaning that intergenerational relationships serving as a location of civic learning are likely to push participants beyond simple acquisition of civic knowledge and toward the more complex dispositions and social-emotional learning required to be an active civic participant. Part of this civic learning occurs through the social bonds of intergenerational relationships, since connections with one's community and feelings of trust and reciprocity both facilitate civic engagement. Leaning into the practice of civic intergenerationality is a way of strengthening these community connections, thereby heightening civic engagement. Civic intergenerationality also brings together people across the life span to work on civic projects, and participation in such work strengthens these relationships by building solidarity and a shared vision of the future. This positive feedback loop means that investments in intergenerational civic work will deepen community bonds and extend civic learning and engagement beyond the initial scope of a given project. Taking an intergenerational approach to civic learning takes the benefits of civic learning and intergenerational contact and heightens them both.

Fortunately, intergenerational civic learning already takes place regularly in American society. Whether it is the passing of values from older adults to younger ones or young people sharing their experiences to inform important political debates over issues like gun control, intergenerational teaching and learning are the basis of much of our civic learning. Even our school systems are based on intergenerational contact, even if it is not purposely embraced as a learning tactic. It is there, however, that the problem arises. By not *intentionally* cultivating civic spaces for intergenerational learning, we take these interactions for granted and fail to harness their transformative power. Furthermore, by limiting these interactions to the family or to top-down modes of learning, we diminish their power. A reciprocal model of intergenerational civic learning — one that focuses on the exchange of knowledge, experiences, skills, and dispositions — can help to guide the United States away from some of the division that plagues our society.

The case studies are suggestive of three of the core factors in intergenerational work that most influence the potential value of civic learning to address the present crisis: *adultism*, *intentionality*, and *location*. Without thinking carefully about how this work engages with each of these touch points, intergenerationality can't reach its full potential.

Adultism

One of the biggest barriers to civic intergenerationality is that it requires adults to see themselves as learners. Because of the way our society prioritizes formal education as the primary means of learning, attitudes of lifelong learning are often missing in American culture. Learning in an intergenerational setting is even more challenging because it requires adults to cede some of their power to young people. The very act of intergenerational learning entails a shift of power in which older adults must resituate themselves in society, even if only temporarily. In other words, it requires disrupting adultism, the power that adults are granted over children and young people in society. The concept draws attention to how this power can be abused to deny young people autonomy and voice in their community.[80]

Power sharing is an uncomfortable process, especially for a hierarchy as deeply ingrained in our society as age. Heather Kennedy, a scholar of community and behavioral health and social work, outlines the four steps that adults in a youth participatory action research program went through while working with young people: "experiencing overwhelming feelings, using critical self-reflection, learning to let go, and forging a collective identity."[81] This highlights the discomfort and hard work that many older people must face in ceding power to young people.

Kennedy goes on to explain that transformational models of intergenerational programming, such as youth–adult partnership, are often not adopted because of adults' failure to reckon with their personal and institutional power.[82] Adults in intergenerational partnerships learn to acknowledge and reflect on the power that comes from their age, embrace the vulnerability of sharing power and learning, and see young people as worthy and equal partners.

To be sure, young people also need to shift their behavior to work with older people. It requires them, as much as older people, to be flexible, tolerant, and open-minded. However, adults generally hold more power than young people and therefore perceive a greater loss by becoming intergenerational learners. For intergenerational spaces to work, adults must recognize the civic agency of younger generations.

Intentionality

For intergenerational civic learning to contribute to civic healing, it must be valued and approached with care. Because it is grounded in subverting power imbalances, successful intergenerational learning requires intention and reflection. We can't just throw people of different generations into a room and hope that a fruitful learning experience ensues; as many tense Thanksgiving dinners can attest, this doesn't always happen. During political conversations in families, intentionality can take the form of having a mind-set that goes beyond being right or wrong and instead seeks to better understand each others' perspectives. Rather than viewing such conversations as challenges to and tests of one's own knowledge and loyalties, one can minimize conflict by reframing such dialogue around listening and learning. In extrafamilial intergenerational programs, civic learning happens when spaces are thoughtfully created in a way that is equity driven and asset oriented, with consideration of the different developmental needs of people of different ages, and with buy-in and co-creation from participants.

The power of intergenerational interactions stems not only from the pools of knowledge each generation has but also from the solidarity that can be built across age divides. Unlike other civic projects, the relationships that are built when working intergenerationally are as important as the project that is being worked on. This means that relationships have to be cultivated as a core part of the learning environment, as VanderVen's theory and an array of practice-centered research studies highlight.

Additionally, the emphasis on less tangible forms of learning, such as social-emotional learning and the development of civic dispositions, makes reflection important so that participants can understand what they have gained through the experience. In one study of an inter-

generational service-learning program, participants observed that interviews with researchers strengthened their intergenerational relationships by giving them a chance to reflect on their learning and their bonds with each other.[83] VanderVen highlights that personal development comes as a result of the individual's construction of an experience after the fact.[84] By institutionalizing this sort of reflection in intergenerational programming and partnerships, the benefits of these relationships can be heightened while individuals can also process some of the challenges they face in the often difficult work of fostering intergenerational spaces.

In an evaluation of one intergenerational community of practice, young people reported appreciating having spaces just for themselves where they could reflect on the unique struggles they experienced in intergenerational work as the group with historically less power.[85] Having a concurrent area for adults to reflect on the experiences of ceding power and creating space for young people would likewise support older generations in adjusting to the dynamics of intergenerational work. Because of the innate power imbalance in this work, regular opportunities for reflection and processing are essential. Beyond that, reflection creates intentionality around the practice of intergenerational civic learning, thus boosting outcomes.

Though the details of how to execute an intergenerational program are beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning here some core questions to keep in mind when organizing one: What support might participants need in order to feel that they can participate? Are participants included in the creation of the program and the adoption of its guidelines, goals, and tactics? When will age-based divisions of the group be made, and will this be essential to the learning that occurs?

Location

A great deal of the research on intergenerational civic learning is focused on learning taking place between parents and children. Both case studies show the ways in which mutual intergenerational learning can happen at home, allowing family members to bridge not only generational divides but also linguistic, technological, ideological, and informational ones. However, there are several important caveats to identify when discussing the family as a location of civic learning. For many people, the family is not a salient, positive, or safe social location. Assuming the universal importance of the family in civic learning, or speaking about it as an inherently positive, mutualistic space for civic development, leaves out those for whom family represents something different. This is why civic intergenerationality must go beyond the family.

To heal the civic divides in our country, we must be willing to engage in intergenerational work outside our immediate family, and this requires extending some of the courtesies that exist in families — care, respect, and trust — to other people. Adults shouldn't trust just their kin on topics like climate change; they should value all young people as experts. As we introduce more intentional intergenerational contact into the civic practices of our democracy, we can build some of the bonds of trust and community that are necessary to drive political change. The development of this social capital can then ease future intergenerational contact and learning, hinting at the feedback loop that arises as civic learning increases community bonds and vice versa.

As we expand intergenerational civic learning out of the family and into communities, it is important to avoid falling into traditional forms of intergenerational programming, such as volunteering or structured mentoring. While sometimes producing useful outcomes, these approaches too often reinforce existing age hierarchies or fail to cultivate strong social bonds among participants.[86] Rather, embracing the power of intergenerational relationships to build social solidarity, facilitate civic learning, and push for community change allows all participants to develop a sense of empowered citizenship. In doing so, people of all ages can learn from and teach one another, slowly creating a stronger sense of interdependence and shared fate — and, in turn, a sense of political solidarity that brings community change.

Conclusion

In intergenerational civic learning, the types of relationships, means of learning, and attributes of the learning environment all influence personal and community outcomes. It is a reciprocal process in which people of all ages act as equal partners in learning and teaching. This type of civic learning may look different across relationships and environments, but it almost always unsettles hierarchies, shifts power, and redefines how we see and relate to one another. Intergenerational civic learning isn't as simple as a transfer of knowledge between participants of different ages. It is also a practice of enacting civic skills to communicate and collaborate civilly.

When we talk about the civic crisis our country faces, we too often characterize generational differences in beliefs, values, and tactics as contributing to the problem while overlooking the power of intergenerational contact to contribute to the solution. We view intergenerational interaction as a place of tension and conflict, rather than an opportunity for civic learning and unity. Reimagining our communities to center intergenerationality as a catalyst for civic exchange and action allows us to move toward a renewed democracy.

There is a need for new scholarship focused on intergenerational civic learning as a means to address the nation's present civic crisis. Within research on the family, the tide has begun to turn from focusing on top-down influence toward considering more family members, including younger ones, as political agents. We need more such research, which broadens our view of civic learning and teaching. More research, too, is needed on how the extended family and less traditional or mainstream family structures influence familial civic learning.

The adult lifelong civic learner also requires closer examination. As it stands, the civic learning that actually occurs after formal education is largely unrecognized as such and is unduly influenced by illiberal appeals; research uncovering what adult civic learning looks like and how to develop adult civic learners would help us understand how we can move toward intentional intergenerational civic exchange. Furthermore, most of the research on intergenerational programs focuses on those intended to serve particular communities, such as college students visiting older adults to minimize their loneliness and isolation. An expanded view that looks at the impact of such programs on all participants as well as the community as a whole would validate the idea that intergenerational learning can be mutually beneficial.

To be sure, intergenerational civic learning isn't a panacea for our civic crisis. In fact, for all the potential it holds, it also regularly causes harm. Intergenerational transfer of knowledge and beliefs can be a conduit for intolerance, and some intergenerational interactions can be unsafe and emotionally draining, especially for people whose identities are unjustly politicized. Beyond that, intergenerational tensions sometimes cloak or are cloaked by racial, class, partisan, and other divides. Age isn't the only factor that separates us, and intergenerationality cannot address every division we face.

Civic intergenerationality that can address the nation's civic crisis must be pro-democracy, tolerant, and intersectional. Constructive intergenerational learning should not be exploitative, forcing individuals from marginalized groups to relive their traumas in order to educate others. Instead, it should cultivate civic friendship among a nation of democratic strangers, where dignity and respect replace the demonization of partisans. Alongside well-resourced K–12 civic education and systemic political reforms, lifelong civic learning can contribute to restoring citizens' faith in our democracy and their sense of agency. Intergenerational civic learning can't solve everything, but it can promote healing through community building, reciprocity, and openness.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ **Ruby Belle Booth** is a fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice, where she focuses on civic learning and engagement. Prior to joining the Brennan Center, Booth was a Diverse Democracy Fellow and research assistant at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), where she researched youth voting, youth activism, and the role that news and social media plays in civic engagement and development. Booth graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Tufts University in 2021 with a BA in history and women's, gender, and sexuality studies.

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