An Ethnography of Political Views at Parkland College

Our group consisted of the members Chumin Wu, Jacob Estes, and Kyra Francois. The ethnography took place in the spring semester of 2016. We wanted to look at the political views of students at Parkland College. At the beginning we leaned towards looking at if the sources of political information had any effect on political views. However as the research went on we saw other trends that stuck out. We ended up focuses on the confidence and consistency of students in their views of politics. We saw a lack of belief in the political atmosphere and think this could be due to the age group and current political climate. The research was split into two parts, a survey and a few in-depth interviews. We surveyed around 20 people at Parkland with five questions. We asked participants if they followed politics, if they participated in elections, what sources they got their information from, if they believed their information was accurate, and if they thought that the American democracy is still functional. These surveys were yes or no responses but since many participants seemed very unsure of the last question, we added an unsure option to the last question. The interviews, of which we had three, were extensions of our surveys but in more depth. They were basically our survey questions exactly except we followed up on why they answered the way they did.

Our surveys were collected by starting out in the student union and surveying students as they passed. We offered candy as an incentive to participate. Our participants were both male and female and because we went to other wings, there was a diversity of majors in our sampling. We asked the questions verbally and recorded the responses on paper. The interviews were not random as we needed to find people that were willing to take time out of their lives to record an
interview. Most if not all of the three interviewees were friends of each interviewer. The interviews were carried out verbally and the responses were recorded in an audio file. The sampling of the survey participants was limited to its randomness by many factors. Our time slots for interviews only allowed us to interview students who were free around noon and on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Certain classes met during our interview times which meant that it was possible people on certain major tracks were not present in our hours and days of surveying. Many students at Parkland take online classes and they were also not available to participate. Additionally, there were many people that were busy and some that did not want to participate. The fact that some did not want to participate should be noted because since one of the survey questions involved participation in politics, the fact that they chose not to be surveyed could have meant that they also had a non participatory attitude towards politics. The interviews were all interviews of people each member knew. It is known that people with similar views become friends easier or that friends tend to converge on their views. This means that our interviews were fairly limited in their ability to capture the attitudes of the Parkland population in its diversity. However the method of surveying was the best we could accomplish practically. Even with the limitations, areas like the student union at lunch provide the best possible diversity we could achieve. In addition, our research group was fairly diverse, academically and ethnically. We were able to find participants of all genders and races considering our own diversity helped make participants more comfortable.

Our data showed that about two-thirds of our participants followed politics while nine-tenths participated in elections. This disparity means that more people participate in elections that would actually call themselves informed. This is a surprising result. It may suggest that our society values voting but not necessarily an informed voter. I think this is due to two major
factors, ritualism and globalization. In “Plastic Red Rituals” by Krystal D’Costa, the author uses red Solo cups to analyze how rituals affect our lives and culture. D’Costa says that the cup “holds roughly the same amount for everyone or at least it gives the illusion of equality...The distributor/host determines how much is poured into the cup for each round and how long to wait between rounds”(83). In a way, voting is a similar ritual of our country. Each vote gives seemingly the same amount of power to each person. Each election provides a different level of power to be delegated. We go on certain days and even certain years decided by our government. This practice has gone on for hundreds of years and is a fundamental part of America. The act of getting in line, showing your ID and stepping into a voting station is very ritualistic. This process unites the people in our country just like the red solo cups do. The problem here however is that while we are in the privacy of voting, we have different and often conflicting views. If the purpose of the ritual of voting is to unite society, then the differences in political views would serve to counteract this. To stop this from happening, our society has also adopted a negative stigma on discussing politics with people of conflicting views. A major contributor to stigma is one caused by Globalization, in specific Mcdonaldization. In David Crawford’s article “Globalization From the Ground Up” he says that big businesses “Produce these products in similar ways, and thereby swamping local cultural distinctiveness with an overwhelming uniformity” (291). In order for business to have the biggest demographic, they have adopted a politically correct approach of respecting differing political views, but not talking about them when avoidable. This value, adopted by almost all major businesses, in turn changes our views to be more homogenous. D’Costa later on says that the cup ritual “Actively discourages behaviors that might suggest membership in alternative social groups” (83). We are homogenous in our methods but not in our values. If it is socially bad to debate with others then it would it hard for
information to be passed from person to person. Because of this I think we value the process of voting and merit its execution while our taboo of discussing politics publicly creates a society where being informed is not required or even desirable.

Age is also an important factor in the data we collected. All of our participants were students at Parkland. The position in society of a student, is one that is open to new ideas. To be open, is to be humble and we see this the last question of our survey. When asked if the American democracy is still functional there was an even split between yes and no but a majority of students responded with unsure. This was the hardest question to answer and it seems that people do not know how to answer it. In our interviews there was clearly questioning inflections when dealing with this question furthering the view that the participants did not have a firm stance. At this stage in our lives, we may be still defining who we are and how our views play into our lives. It may be a good thing that on so many of these questions our participants were not very confident about their answers because it means they don’t think they are ready or know enough to answer them correctly.

Our ethnography concluded by looking at how students viewed politics as a whole instead of certain issues inside of politics. We found that although participation in the system was high, the level of knowledge and confidence was rather low. Society seems to value voting but look down on voicing opinions. Politics is separated by political views but I think in this case, we see that age makes a big difference in how we approach politics. Instead of treating the country as a mostly two party system, we should look at how age affects not just political stance, but the different motives and methods that each age group has. Going forward it would help this project to look at a similar study done on people with less media influence, also with age groups
that are older and perhaps even younger. It seems that the older you get, the more confident you become on your political views.

Bibliography
