



CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research
on Civic Learning & Engagement

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The Future of American Democracy: A Mixed Picture More Young People Are Involved, But Nearly 1 in 5 Are Civically and Politically Disengaged

African-American and Asian-American Youth Most Engaged

Washington, DC – Conventional wisdom is challenged by a new report on the political and civic involvement of young Americans. Young people are working in many ways to improve their communities and the nation by volunteering, voting, protesting, and raising money for charity and political candidates. In addition, African-American and Asian-American youth are the most engaged, according to the study conducted by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE). But, the findings also show that a large group of young people are completely disconnected from civic life.

In the last year, more than 36 percent of young people aged 15-25 volunteered, nearly 20 percent have been involved with solving community problems, and almost a quarter had raised money for charity. Many of the civic and political indicators showed only small differences between this age group and those aged 26 and older.

Despite this higher-than-expected level of engagement, the study does show that nearly two-thirds of young Americans are considered disengaged, with nearly one in five not involved in *any* of the 19 possible forms of civic participation. “Participating is good for kids’ development. Our schools and communities need their contributions. And their civic development is crucial for the future of our democracy,” said CIRCLE director Peter Levine.

African-American youth are the most politically engaged racial/ethnic group. Compared to other groups, African-Americans are the most likely to vote regularly, belong to groups involved with politics, donate money to candidates and parties, display buttons or signs, canvass, and contact the media. Asian-American youth are by far the most civically engaged. They are most likely to work on community problems, volunteer regularly, boycott, and sign petitions.

“This survey represents the first time Asian-American youth have been asked about a comprehensive range of civic and political indicators. While they seem to be highly civically engaged, only 20 percent of Asian-American youth ages 20 to 25 identified as regular voters,” said Mark Hugo Lopez, Research Director at CIRCLE. “But even though most don’t vote, 51 percent – the highest result among the racial and ethnic groups surveyed – said they tried to persuade others in an election.”

While the majority of younger and older Americans believe government should do more to solve problems, there has been a nearly 20-point increase since 2002 in the percentage of young Americans who say that “government is almost always wasteful and inefficient.” This shift was especially pronounced among Democrats and among African-Americans. There was also a significant drop in trust in government among Americans aged 26 and over.

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“Knowledge matters. Among young people who are disengaged – for instance, those who have not volunteered, contributed to solving community problems or raised money for a charity – more than 20 percent could not answer any basic civic knowledge questions,” said Lopez. “But when young people get involved, their knowledge of the world around them increases. This pattern is particularly clear among those who identify as regular voters. Only six percent of young regular voters could not answer any of the factual questions.”

The 2006 National Civic and Political Health Survey is the most up-to-date and detailed look at how young Americans are participating in politics and communities. The results can be found at www.civicyouth.org.

Other major findings include:

- **Increase in Anti-Immigrant Sentiment and Drop in Acceptance of Homosexuals.** Young people are more favorable toward gays and immigrants than older people, but since 2002, there has been a 6 point increase in those who say immigrants are a burden to our country and a 7 point decline in those who say that homosexuality should be accepted. On the other hand, 67 percent of youth say they have confronted someone who said something that they considered offensive, such as a racist or other prejudiced comment.
- **Immigration Protests Drew Mass Youth Support:** 23% of immigrant youth and 18% of young children of immigrant parents reported that they had protested in the past 12 months. In contrast, young people who were born in the U.S. to parents born in the U.S. reported a protest rate of 10%.
- **Shift in Political Identification** - There has been a small shift in young people away from the Republicans - 28 percent now identify as Republicans or lean to the Republicans, compared to 31 percent in 2002. The percentage of young people identifying as Democrats or lean to the Democrats (47 percent) has not changed.
- **Majority Tuned In to Politics and News** - Young people appear to be paying attention to politics and following the news - 72 percent say they follow what's going on in government and public affairs at least some of the time. There is a strong relationship between following the news and being civically engaged.

“The public, the political parties and the media all need to be reminded that saying that young people just don’t participate reinforces a myth,” added Levine. “Youth turnout was sharply up in 2004, and the survey shows that when young people are asked to vote and volunteer, they are much more likely to do so.”

The 2006 National Civic and Political Health Survey was conducted from April 27 to June 11, 2006. The survey sampled 1700 young people ages 15 to 25, and 550 adults ages 26 and older. The survey also over-sampled young Latinos, African-Americans and Asian-Americans (providing the first comprehensive civic/political survey of Asian-Americans youth). This survey was funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Since 2001, CIRCLE has conducted, collected, and funded research on the civic and political participation of young Americans. CIRCLE is based in the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy and is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and Carnegie Corporation of New York.