

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

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COLLEGE STUDENTS REDEFINE CIVIC PARTICIPATION

A CIRCLE Literature Review by the Kettering Foundation's Nicholas Longo and Ross Meyer provides a detailed account of recent trends in the research on civic engagement among college students. The authors cite studies from a variety of sources, including CIRCLE research and CIRCLE-funded research. Longo and Meyer not only summarize recent trends, but also identify areas where more research is needed.

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Longo and Meyer begin with the often-cited findings of the lack of participation in college students. While initial studies discovered a "silent generation" of college students, later research strove to understand why, and whether college students were truly apathetic toward civic participation. Perhaps most significantly, the review finds an emerging trend: college students are redefining participation and are not as apathetic as earlier research suggested.

MEASURING STUDENT ATTITUDES ON POLITICS

The authors first report the research on what they call the "alienated college student," which emerged between 1994 and 2000. This body of research contended that college students were not participating at the same rates as previous generations. "There is widespread evidence, along with a general characterization in the media, that college students today are cynical and apathetic about politics," Dr. Stephen Bennett and Dr. Linda Bennett (2001) wrote. This characterization of college students gained popular momentum, starting with Robert D. Putnam's landmark study on the decline of civic engagement in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). As evidence of alienation, Longo and Meyer cite national surveys by The National Association of Secretaries of State and the Kettering Foundation, which found that college students held pessimistic attitudes about the political system. Moreover, the lower voter turnout rates of college students, a tangible measure of civic participation, seemed to reflect their negative attitudes towards government.

Yet, research findings are mixed. Voter turnout among college students rose during the 2004 presidential election when numerous organizations focused on college students. Many students reported feeling pessimistic about the government while still planning to vote, as found in a 2004 survey by Harvard University's Institute of Politics (IOP). Furthermore, the authors cite a CIRCLE study finding that "a vast majority of college students were active in the 2004 election." Since 2000, college students have showed increased interest in the news, and there has been a wave of organizing, including many "efforts to use consumer power to make change." Anne Blackhurst's (2002) study of three Midwestern institutions buttresses the findings of Harvard's IOP and CIRCLE. Blackhurst found "that college students may not be as cynical about politicians and the political process as the conventional wisdom suggests."

In sum, it appears that college students are not as politically engaged as previous generations, but the reasons behind this trend are mixed. Some research finds that college students shun politics, but other research shows students are interested in getting involved in the political process.

ALTERNATIVES TO POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

In any case, political participation—specifically voting—is only one measure of civic engagement. Longo and Meyer also consider the literature on community participation, in which they find a paradox called "The Scissor Effect." In short, "The Scissor Effect: college students are engaged in their community, even if they are not involved in political activities." Or, in other words, there is an observed rise in community involvement and a decline in political participation. Longo and Meyer identify several qualitative and quantitative studies which show that college students are interested in getting involved in their community as a sort of backlash to what they see as an incompetent political system. Along these lines, Linda Sax (2000) captures the sentiments of college students when she writes "it is quite possible that students are simply placing their energies where they feel they can make a difference." Similarly, other research has termed the surge in community service as an alternative to politics.

The authors' picture of college students is beginning to emerge;


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college students are fed up with the “individualistic, divisive, negative and often counterproductive” role of politics; instead, students are focusing their energy where they can make a tangible difference—their communities. In fact, the student-written *New Student Politics* publication argues that “student work in communities is not an alternative to politics, but rather an ‘alternative politics.’” Longo and Meyer notice this thread and discuss the perception gap between researchers and college students. Students believe they are not apathetic about civic involvement and their involvement is just as important as the traditional measures of political engagement created by researchers. The authors sum up this idea succinctly: “[t]he students, it seems, are part of a long tradition of younger generations casting a new civic identity and new student politics.”

In conclusion, Longo and Meyer recommend four trends in need of further research.

1. “Better awareness of the emerging movement among college students to define an alternative politics which is more participatory, open, inclusive, and deliberative.”
2. “Greater understanding of the recent trends toward increased participation in conventional politics, especially seen in the 2004 election.”
3. “Deeper insights into the connection—and lack of connection—between involvement in community service and political engagement.”
4. “Emerging practices for engaging college students in public life, and especially on the role that colleges and universities can play in education for democracy.”

The full manuscript by Longo and Meyer can be downloaded from:
http://www.civicyouth.org/research/areas/higher_ed.htm. 

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The Center for Information & Research
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AROUND THE CIRCLE: RESEARCH & PRACTICE

School of Public Policy
University of Maryland
2101 Van Munching Hall
College Park, MD 20742
301.405.2790
www.civicyouth.org

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