

THE CHANGING TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

CIRCLE and the Spencer Foundation released a report entitled *Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood*. The study, written by Constance Flanagan, Peter Levine, and Richard Settersten, argues that life has changed dramatically for people in their 20s. Marriage, childbearing, financial independence, and other aspects of the “transition to adulthood” have been transformed since the 1970s, and are now very different for people with and without college educations. These changes and differences powerfully affect civic engagement. For example, it appears that younger generations have delayed voting, in much the same way that they have delayed marriage and childbearing. But young adults without college experience are permanently missing some aspects of civic engagement—such as group membership—that were common thirty years ago. The full report can be downloaded from CIRCLE’s Web site at <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=327>.

(DIS)ENGAGED YOUNG ADULTS

The decline in civic engagement is most stark for young people without college education. The report finds that over the past three decades, civic engagement declined for both youth with and without college experience (see Figures 1 & 2). The authors note, “The non-college group, having begun with lower levels of participation, has now reached a critically low point.” As shown in Figure 1, non-college youth are less likely than their college counterparts to participate in all ten measures of civic engagement (2000-2006).¹

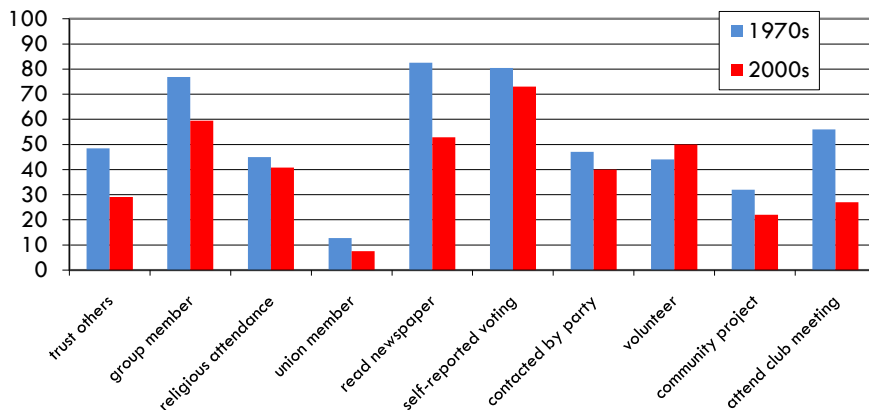
The decline in civic engagement is most stark for young people without college education. The report finds that over the past three decades, civic engagement declined for both youth with and without college experience, leaving the later group at critically low levels.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF LIFE FOR YOUNG ADULTS

According to the authors, “To some extent, the gap in civic engagement between youth with and without college experience can be explained by opportunities and resources in childhood and adolescence.” They point to research showing that a student’s socio-economic status (SES) and the average SES of the student’s school both independently predict the likelihood that the student will receive important civic learning opportunities.

But lack of opportunities and resources in childhood and adolescence do not fully explain the decline in civic engagement. The authors argue that the changing nature of life for young people in their 20s needs to be considered. They examined five key experiences that define the transition to adulthood (leaving home, completing school, entering the workforce, getting married, and having children) and found enormous changes in the timing of when the experiences occur over the past 30 years. One of these measures, marriage, has declined steeply between 1970 and 2000. This is especially true of non-college youth, for whom marriage rates declined from 71% in 1968 to 31% in 2007.

Figure 1: Civic Engagement for Age 20-29, With at Least One Year of College



With the delay in marriage and other adult experiences, the authors argue that young people may also be delaying becoming stakeholders in local communities. According to the report, “Because it takes longer today to launch careers, start families, and set down roots in communities, one wonders whether the civic lives of young adults are also on

hold—and what risks these delays might bring to individuals and societies. Alternatively, the lengthening period of emerging adulthood may offer unique opportunities for civic engagement.”

ACCORDING TO THE REPORT, “BECAUSE IT TAKES LONGER TODAY TO LAUNCH CAREERS, START FAMILIES, AND SET DOWN ROOTS IN COMMUNITIES, ONE WONDERS WHETHER THE CIVIC LIVES OF YOUNG ADULTS ARE ALSO ON HOLD— AND WHAT RISKS THESE DELAYS MIGHT BRING TO INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES. ALTERNATIVELY, THE LENGTHENING PERIOD OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD MAY OFFER UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.”

education. The 1,158 public two-year colleges enroll 45% of all U.S. undergraduates.” They suggest that community colleges can be a key institutional setting for recruiting young people into political life. Another promising area to reach disengaged young people is through National Service Programs such as Service and Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps, Youth Build, and Public Allies. ★

ENDNOTES

1 Ten measures of civic engagement are: trust others, group member, religious attendance, union member, read newspaper, self-reported voting, contacted by party, volunteer, community project, and attend club meeting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report offers several recommendations on how to increase civic engagement among those who do not attend 4-year colleges and universities. They offer two areas to focus on: community colleges and national service programs. According to the report, “Community colleges are the largest and fastest growing sector of higher

Figure 2: Civic Engagement for Age 20-29, With no College

