

CIRCLE RELEASES 2006 NATIONAL CIVIC AND POLITICAL HEALTH SURVEY

CIRCLE's new *2006 National Civic and Political Health Survey* provides the most up-to-date and detailed look at how young Americans are participating in politics and communities. The survey takes a broad look at political and civic activity and finds that many young Americans are involved. For example, 36 percent have volunteered within the last year; 30 percent have boycotted a product because of the conditions under which it was made or the values of the company that made it; and 67 percent have confronted someone who said something that they considered offensive, such as a racist or other prejudiced comment.

However, certain groups of young people are largely *disengaged*, including 17 percent who have not done any of the 19 measured forms of participation within the last 12 month.

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The survey also finds that most young Americans are strikingly uninformed or misinformed about important aspects of politics and current events. However, those who participate (vote, join groups, and volunteer) tend to be better informed. Additionally, the survey finds a loss in trust in the government among young people as compared to 2002.

The survey was released on October 3, 2006 at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. It was conducted from April 27 to June 11, 2006 by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (on behalf of CIRCLE) with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The survey focuses on young people but contains a representative sample of older Americans for comparison. It is one of the few surveys of its kind containing over-samples of Asian-American youth. In addition, it also includes over-samples of African-American and Latino youth and was translated into Spanish. The questionnaire largely replicates one designed by Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins and fielded in 2002.¹

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD

The survey looked at 19 measures of civic engagement. According to CIRCLE director Dr. Peter Levine, "People have numerous ways to influence the world around them, and it is important to look beyond the most frequently measured forms of engagement—voting and volunteering. Our survey found many young people are engaging in a variety of activities

¹ *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation*, available via www.civicyouth.org/research/products/youth_index.htm

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CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research
on Civic Learning & Engagement

A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

College Park, MD, August 25: Summer inside the Washington Beltway is traditionally a time for rest and reflection and for trying to escape the muggy heat. But not this summer at CIRCLE. As you'll read in the following pages of the newsletter and on our Web site (www.civicyouth.org), we are busy analyzing the data from the 2006 Civic and Political Health Survey, helping the National Conference on Citizenship to build an index of national civic health, awarding over half a million dollars in research grants on K-12 civic education, writing a separate fact sheet on youth voting for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, crunching numbers on community college students, immigrant youth, and other topics, and developing research projects for the near future. In addition, we launched a series of focus groups on about ten college campuses.

It is worth pausing to recall what all this activity is *for*. At CIRCLE, we are neutral about some things. For example, we don't care whether young people engage as radicals, moderates, conservatives, liberals, or libertarians—that's up to them. And we don't assume that any particular form of civic education or mobilization is effective until we have seen it tested.

However, we are not neutral about youth civic engagement. America needs its young people to do important work in politics and civic life, for their own sake and for the vitality of our democracy. CIRCLE's research, like all the good work of our colleagues across the country, is valuable only insofar as it advances that goal.

Sincerely,



Peter Levine

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of young Americans. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 and is funded predominantly by Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Pew Charitable Trusts. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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including protesting, persuading others to vote, addressing community problems, boycotting, and raising money for charities. Nevertheless, there remain a sizeable number of young people who are disengaged from civic activities. Our challenge is to find out more about why so many young people disengage from civic life—and about the programs that can help turn this trend around.”

Some young people are intensely involved. Thirteen percent of American youth are what we call “dual activists,” engaging in at least two different forms of community engagement and two different forms of political participation. Almost seven percent of young Americans are hyper-involved, claiming ten or more different kinds of participation. Compared to their peers, this hyper-engaged group is more likely to be Asian-American, Democratic (or leaning toward the Democrats), liberal, suburban, college-educated, and from college-educated homes. Most are confident in their ability to make a difference.

The bad news is that substantial numbers of young people are disconnected from politics and community life. A majority of young people (58 percent) are disengaged, meaning they are unable to cite two forms of civic or two forms of political engagement that they have done. A subset of the disengaged—the 17 percent of youth who have not done any of the 19 forms of civic engagement—are much less confident in their own ability to make a difference, less likely to have college-educated parents or parents who volunteer, less likely to have any college experience, less aligned with either party, and more likely to be white.

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE MATTERS FOR ENGAGEMENT

The survey found that most young Americans are uninformed or misinformed about important aspects of politics and current events. For example, 53 percent are unaware that only citizens can vote in federal elections; only 22 percent can correctly name at least one member of the President’s Cabinet; and only 34 percent know that the United States has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

However, those who participate tend to be better informed. Of those who could answer all six of our knowledge questions correctly, 48 percent were regular voters, 32 percent were active members of at least one group, and 50 percent had volunteered. In contrast, of those who could answer no questions correctly, just 15 percent voted regularly, 11 percent belonged to any group, and 25 percent volunteered.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT DOWN

One of the most striking findings was the loss of trust in government among young people. When Continued on page 12

19 INDICATORS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

CIVIC INDICATORS

- 1. Community problem solving:**
Working together informally with someone or some group to solve a community problem
- 2. Regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization:**
Working in some way to help others for no pay
- 3. Active membership in a group or association:**
Belonging to and actively participating in groups or associations, either locally or nationally
- 4. Participation in fundraising run/walk/ride:**
Personally walking, running, or bicycling for a charitable cause
- 5. Other fundraising for charity:**
Helping raise money for a charitable cause

ELECTORAL INDICATORS

- 6. Regular voting:**
Voting regularly in both local and national elections
- 7. Persuading others:**
Talking to others when there is an election taking place to try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates
- 8. Displaying buttons, signs, stickers:**
For a candidate, political party, or political organization
- 9. Campaign contributions:**
Contributing money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates
- 10. Volunteering for candidates or political organizations**

INDICATORS OF POLITICAL VOICE

- 11. Contacting officials:**
Contacting or visiting a public official, at any level of government, to ask for assistance or to express an opinion
- 12. Contacting the print media:**
Contacting a newspaper or magazine to express an opinion on an issue
- 13. Contacting the broadcast media:**
Calling in to a radio or television talk show to express an opinion on a political issue, even if it is not aired
- 14. Protesting:**
Taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration
- 15. E-mail petitions:**
Signing an e-mail petition
- 16. Written petitions:**
Signing a written petition about a political or social issue
- 17. Boycotting:**
Not buying something because of conditions under which the product is made, or because of disapproval of the company that produces it
- 18. Buycotting:**
Buying a certain product or service because of approval of the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it
- 19. Canvassing:**
Having done some work as a canvasser going door-to-door for a political or social group or candidate.


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this survey was last conducted in 2002, young Americans appeared to be highly favorable toward government. About two thirds of people between the ages of 15 and 25 felt that government should do more to solve problems, that governmental regulation of business was necessary not harmful, and that government deserved more credit than it usually got. Young people were substantially more favorable toward the government than their elders were.

In 2006, about the same proportion of young people—63 percent—still believe that the government should do more to solve problems. Just 31 percent believe that “Government does too many things better left to businesses and individuals.” However, young people are significantly less likely in 2006 to favor government regulation of business. More of them say that government is “almost always wasteful and inefficient” than say that it “often does a better job than people give it credit for” (47

percent versus 45 percent).

According to Dr. Levine, “While we don’t know the exact reason for the declining trust in government, the main news headlines in 2002 involved an attack on the United States and the invasion of Afghanistan. Four years later, the news was dominated by Katrina and the federal response and by the war in Iraq. Right now, most young people seem to want the government to address problems but doubt that it is effective.”

The complete findings can be found on CIRCLE’s Web site at www.civicyouth.org 

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www.civicyouth.org



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