



# Thirty Year Trends in American Adolescents' Civic Engagement:

## A Story of Changing Participation and Educational Differences

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Thirty Year Trends in American Adolescents' Civic Engagement:  
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## Abstract

Using annual cross-sectional data from Monitoring the Future, the present study examines trends in high school seniors' civic and political beliefs and their anticipated civic participation over a 30-year period. These trends are examined to determine general patterns over time, and they are also decomposed based on youths' college plans to elucidate differences. Findings suggest that recent cohorts are, generally, less inclined to participate in conventional and alternative forms of political participation, yet they are increasingly drawn toward activities where they are able to serve their communities on a regular basis. Throughout this period high proportions of high school seniors expressed intentions to vote and interest in the government and current affairs. Trust in government and elected officials were consistently low, and the variation over time that does emerge was positively related to whether high school seniors have hope for the world. Average levels of all measures differ significantly between youth with different post-high school aspirations. Youth with 4-year college plans are more civically inclined across the various civic indicators than their peers with 2-year or no college plans.

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Sparked by disquieting statistics chronicling declines in civic participation as well as the emergence of new grassroots civic initiatives, the turn of the millennium has seen a renewed interest in whether younger generations will become engaged citizens. The public image of young people has historically characterized them as uninvolved and apathetic, and indeed voting trends show that younger adults are less likely to vote than older adults (Lopez, Kirby, Sagoff, & Herbst, 2005). These claims represent untested hypotheses about how youth civic engagement in recent years compares to that of the past. Most previous research on civic engagement consists of short-term studies of college undergraduates or of middle- and upper-class youth who plan to attend college; the civic engagement of the traditionally “forgotten half” who make other post-secondary choices has received little scholarly attention. Furthermore, few studies conceptualize civic engagement as a multidimensional construct or measure these multiple dimensions in a single study.

Adolescence, marked by identity exploration and possibility, allows young people to explore new ideologies, experiences, and political and social worldviews (Arnett, 2004; Flanagan & Syvertsen, 2006). The relative freedom and concern with identity formation during this developmental period present young people with unique opportunities to explore who they are as citizens. They may do so by getting involved (or, *not*) in local and national politics, taking a stand (or, *not*) for issues they believe in, and volunteering (or, *not*) their time and talents to their communities. Much of the existing research about adolescents' civic engagement has focused on antecedents of civic development as well as the contexts that promote (or impede) the refinement of civic values and participation. The present study extends research in this area beyond the

developmental processes that undergird young people's civic identities by focusing on social change, as revealed by trends over a period of 30 years in high school seniors' civic and political beliefs and anticipated participation. Our study explores trends in intentions to vote; participation in conventional political activities like writing to candidates, working for and giving money to campaigns; engagement in alternative political activities such as boycotting and demonstrating; participation in community service; and interest in current events. We also compare trends for youths' trust in government and sense of hope for the world. Finally, to determine whether these trends differ in relation to adolescents' likely social class trajectories, we compare the views of youth who do and do not plan to attend college.

### *Civic and Political Engagement*

Although voter turnout has typically been used to gauge Americans' civic and political participation, there are many other ways citizens get involved. Indeed, civic and political engagement can take a variety of forms including, but not limited to, signing petitions, boycotting, keeping abreast on current events, writing to elected officials, posting political commentary on blogs, and volunteering in the community. According to generational replacement theory, a driving force behind social and political change is that members of earlier cohorts who participate in these activities are replaced by later cohorts as the latter move into adulthood (Delli Carpini, 2006; Lyons & Alexander, 2000). It is during this developmental period that young people refine their identities as citizens and develop habits of engaged citizenship. Tracking trends in young people's civic participation is important for understanding the viability of this process for sustaining our democracy (Flanagan, 2003). Until the 2008 presidential election the available evidence has painted a limited picture of younger cohort's civic beliefs and willingness to take on civic and political roles in their communities.

Voting trends, the classic indicator of civic engagement, reveal that young people (age 18 to 25) are typically less inclined to vote than older citizens (Lopez et al., 2005). Since 1972, the gap between younger and older voters has fluctuated between 16 and 28%, with the smallest margin occurring in 1972, the first year that 18 year-olds were eligible to vote in the United States (Lopez et al., 2006). Cohort comparisons indicate that disinterest in voting is not merely due to young people's youthfulness but rather reflects generational declines which are likely to persist with age (Putnam, 2000). Similarly, generational research conducted by Jennings and Stoker (2004) comparing Generation X, Baby Boomers, and The Long Civic Generation revealed stark generational differences in social trust (i.e., belief that people generally can be trusted) and civic engagement, suggesting that the era in which generations come of age has a lasting impact on their civic character. Unprecedented voter outreach efforts in the 2004, 2006, and 2008 election cycles, most of which targeted the youth vote led to a substantial recovery in turnout (e.g., up 11% in the 2004 election) narrowing the chasm between young and older voter turnout and pointing to a potential reversal of the long term declines in youth voting.

In an effort to tap the wide spectrum of options Americans have for expressing their political beliefs, engaging with the government, and participating in their communities, recent studies have started to operationalize civic and political participation more broadly than previous work (e.g., Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002; Levine & Lopez, 2004). Cross-sectional data collected in 2002 and 2006 reported in Lopez and colleagues' (2006) assessment of America's civic and political health show that approximately one-third of today's young people (age 15 to 26) have participated in a boycott or buycott (i.e., bought a product or service because they support the social or political values of the manufacturer or provider), while fewer have signed a petition, participated in a protest, or canvassed (i.e., going door to door for a political or

social group or cause). Assessment of these behaviors across multiple generations of American citizens demonstrates that participation in these “alternative” political activities are comparable across generations, particularly for consumer activities like boycotting and buycotting (Ketter et al., 2002; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

Community service, or volunteerism, represents yet another means through which citizens reach out and participate in their communities. While service can be used to redress social and political problems, the most common motivation cited by people – young and old, alike – for volunteering is to help others (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Keeter et al., 2002; Kiesa et al., 2007; Lopez & Marcelo, 2007). Beyond its contribution to the greater good, community service is thought to promote feelings of social responsibility, connection, as well as a host of other prosocial outcomes (e.g., Billig, 2000; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Keeter and colleagues’ (2002) national survey of individuals from four generations revealed that comparable percentages of individuals in each generation volunteered regularly, although people in the youngest generation (i.e., DotNets) tended to be a bit more episodic in their service.

Snapshots of traditional civic indicators have led some to conclude that America’s youth are increasingly disconnected from civic life (see Bennett, 2008; Delli Carpini, 2000), while others balance their interpretation of declining participation in conventional civic activities with counterevidence which suggests youth are engaged but in less traditional ways (e.g., Lopez et al., 2006), such as community service and online political activities. Though the growth of these new forms of participation is encouraging, conventional political activities (e.g., voting, writing to public officials) remain essential to the democratic process and cannot be easily replaced by other forms of civic engagement. In the present paper, we analyze trends in high school seniors’ civic engagement across 30 years to address the unanswered questions of whether youth are

really less interested and engaged in civic activities than they were in years past, and in which civic activities today's youth are most willing to participate.

### *Trust in Government and Hope for the World*

Political scientists have typically turned to data on adults' perceptions of the trustworthiness of elected officials and the government to gauge a democracy's civic health, or state of order: whereas trust in government is correlated with engagement, cynicism has been shown to "undermine the political confidence necessary to motivate and sustain political engagement" (Putnam, 2000; p. 47). According to Putnam, studies of American adults in the 1960s revealed that three out of every four citizens felt that the government *could* be trusted. Similar studies conducted in 1997, revealed this no longer to be true as nearly 60% of American adults report believing that government officials care *very little* about everyday citizens suggesting a steep rise in public alienation from politics. Despite the importance placed on trusting the government, few studies have asked young people whether or not they have faith in the American government and its leadership. Longitudinal research conducted during the 2004 presidential campaign comparing high school students who voted with their peers who did not suggests that whether young people vote may be related to the amount of trust they have for local and national elected officials (Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Mitra, 2006). The eligible voters in this study who did not vote experienced a significant decline during the course of the campaign in their belief that elected officials could be trusted, whereas their peers who did vote remained fairly stable in their belief that elected officials could be trusted to act in the public's best interest.

Youths' opinions about the future of the world, that is, their "public hope," are also important for democratic action (Lummis, 2001; p. 44). To have public hope is to believe that the

world is a benevolent place filled with opportunities and promise in the sense that people can make a difference and that democracy is possible. This reflects what Bandura (2000) referred to as collective efficacy. Thus, public hope may play an integral role in shaping civic behaviors and engagement.

### *Divergent Paths*

The present study will also investigate whether trends in youth civic engagement over the last 30 years differ based on college plans. As others have observed, opportunities for civic, political, and community engagement may not be equally accessible to all youth (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). We distinguish youth on the basis of their college plans for two reasons. First, this demographic profile of youth who do not plan to attend college matches the characteristics of those least likely to be civically engaged: lower SES, minorities, children of less educated parents (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003). Whereas in contrast, youth who plan to attend college tend to come from financially stable families and have college-educated parents (Ellwood & Kane, 2000), suggesting that they may have had more opportunities and encouragement for civic engagement from the start.

Second, recent research suggests that the current educational system may contribute to increases in the gap in civic engagement between college-bound and non-college bound youth. Research conducted by Kahne and Middaugh with over 2,000 high school seniors in California uncovered a striking disparity in the school-based civic learning opportunities provided to students based both on their academic track and the school's average socioeconomic status (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2005; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). A comparison of students in diverse academic tracking sequences revealed that courses for college-bound students provided significantly more activities to build civic commitment and skills (e.g., mock elections)

than did courses for their peers in lower academic tracks. Their findings converge with evidence from several additional studies (e.g., Hart & Atkins, 2002; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004; Skinner & Chapman, 1999) to show that youth in high poverty school districts (from which college attendance is generally lower) are less likely to have opportunities at school to participate in service-learning and community outreach projects due to lack of resources and civically-engaged adult role models.

Given the growing emphasis on volunteer service and civic participation in college admissions and middle-class schools, we hypothesize that the difference in engagement between college and non-college bound youth has grown in recent decades. Though the link between education and civic participation in adults is heralded as the “best-documented finding in American political behavior research” (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik–Barry, 1996; p. 31), we know little about how trends in the civic engagement of young people on the cusp of adulthood vary depending on college aspirations.

#### *Aims of Current Study*

Few attempts have been made to explore trends in young people’s civic engagement and beliefs, other than trends for voting. Using annual survey data from Monitoring the Future for 1976 to 2005, we investigate patterns over time in how youth engage in and think about their involvement in American civic and political life. The purpose of this paper is four–fold: (a) to describe trends in three forms of participation: conventional political activities, alternative political activities, and community service, (b) to show patterns over time in young people’s interest in the government and current affairs, (c) to present trends in young people’s trust in government and hope for the world, and (d) to examine the extent to which these trends differ based on youths’ post–high school educational aspirations.

## Method

To chart the trends among high school seniors' civic and political participation, we used data from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade survey of the Monitoring the Future Study (Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley, 2006). The data presented in this paper represent the 30-year period between 1976 and 2005. Surveys are administered in the spring of each year to a nationally representative<sup>1</sup> sample of high school seniors (ages 17–19) in public and private high schools across the United States. Sample weights are used in our analyses to ensure that the findings from the data are representative of high school seniors in the United States. In each wave of this ongoing study, between 16,000 and 18,000 students are randomly assigned to receive one of six different forms of the questionnaire. Hence, approximately 2,500–3,000 students respond to a given question each year. Across all of the years there are nearly equal numbers of male and female participants.

This repeated cross-section design, using a single age group, is well suited to capturing historical changes in attitudes and behavior, and these changes necessarily reflect a combination of cohort and period effects. Needless to say, results cannot be interpreted as changes within individuals over time, as different individuals answered the questions each year.

### *Measures*

Multiple items were available for measuring some of our constructs. Because our focus is on time trends, we determined whether to combine items into scales by examining the similarity of their time trends, as reflected by the correlation over time between annual means and alpha coefficients calculated at the aggregate-level<sup>2</sup> (or when scales contain only two items, the inter-item correlation). Constructs were created as the mean across items. Furthermore, all constructs were dichotomized (0,1) for ease of interpretation and to simplify comparisons across scales.

Means can be interpreted as the percentage of youth in each year who positively endorsed the construct.

Note that many of the items in the constructs have a future orientation. The developmental limitations for some forms of civic engagement (e.g., not being old enough to vote or travel independently to events) make it necessary for researchers to frame questions prospectively. For example, several of the questions ask students if they have already engaged in various conventional and alternative political activities or if they plan to do so in the future. Consequently, these measures assess both past behavior and intended behavior. Note, however, that research has demonstrated a direct link between individuals' intentions and subsequent behavior (Ajzen, 2002). All constructs in this report are based on participants' self-assessments.

*Forms of civic and political engagement.* To assess the various ways that young people engage in their communities and in politics, we examined four measures of engagement: conventional, voting, alternative, and community service. The three-item Conventional Engagement scale asks participants if they have or plan to: (a) write to public officials, (b) give money to a candidate or cause, and (c) work in a political campaign ( $\alpha$  for aggregate-level items = .90). Voting was another type of conventional engagement measured, yet its trend was distinct, and thus we examined the trend in "voting in a public election" separately. The two items that formed the Alternative Engagement scale (aggregate-level  $r = .73$ ) measured whether participants have or plan to participate in a lawful demonstration and boycott certain products or stores. Participants responded to all of these items using one of four response options: *I probably won't do this* (1), *Don't know* (2), *I probably will do this*, (3), and *I have already done this* (4). To differentiate lack of engagement from past and planned engagement, we coded these

responses as 0 for Probably Won't Do or Don't Know and 1 for Probably Will Do or Have Already Done.

To determine trends in high school seniors' community service, we used a single item: "How often do you participate in community affairs or volunteer work?" The original 5-point scale allowed students to indicate their approximate level of service: *Never* (1), *A few times a year* (2), *Once or twice a month* (3), *At least once a week* (4), *Almost everyday* (5). This variable was dichotomized into less than once per month (0) and at least once per month (1).

*Interest in government and current events.* Participants' indicated on a 5-point scale how much interest they take in government or current affairs. The scale was dichotomized to separate high school seniors with *very little or no interest* (0) and those who express *some, a lot, or a great interest* (1).

*Trust in the government.* Two items reflect participants' trust in elected officials and the government: (a) "Do you think some of the people running the government are crooked?" (b) "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government to do what is right?" The original 5-point response scales were recoded so that a score of 0 reflects distrust and 1 reflects trust in elected officials and the government. The average aggregate-level correlation across years for these two items was .88, indicating very similar time trends.

*Public hope.* A single item assessed participants' global sense of public hope by asking their level of (dis)agreement with the statement, "When I think about terrible things, it is hard to hold much hope for the world." This measure was recoded to group high school seniors who *neither agree nor disagree, agree, or mostly agree* (0) and those who *disagree or mostly disagree* (1). Grouping participants who responded *neither agree nor disagree* with participants who agreed allows us to focus our analysis on those participants who indicated they definitely *do*

have hope (i.e., those who disagreed). Assigning this group the value of 1 means that higher values of the variable reflect greater public hope.

*College aspirations.* Participants indicated their college aspirations through their answers to two questions: (a) “Do you plan to graduate from a 2–year college?” and (b) “Do you plan to graduate from a 4–year college?” In response, students could indicate that they *Definitely Won’t* (1), *Probably Won’t* (2), *Probably Will* (3), or *Definitely Will* (4). Based on their responses to these questions adolescents were grouped into one of three mutually exclusive groups to allow for comparisons by college aspirations: youth with no college plans (i.e., definitely or probably will not go to either a 2- or 4-year college), youth with 2–year college plans (i.e., definitely or probably will go to a 2-year college but not a 4-year college), and youth with 4–year college plans (i.e., definitely or probably will go to a 4-year college).<sup>3</sup>

*Covariates.* Consistent with other national studies (e.g., Lopez & Marcelo, 2006), we found that across this 30–year period youth became increasingly likely to indicate that they planned to graduate from a 4–year college (1976: 52%; 2005: 82%) and less likely to indicate that they had no college plans (1976: 32%; 2005: 8%). The percentage of youth who reported they planned to graduate from a 2–year college remained fairly stable (between 10 – 15%). Furthermore, analyses of the Current Population Survey (March Supplements, 1968–2006) by Lopez and Marcelo (2006) reveal that non–college attending youth are disproportionately more likely to be male, African–American, and Latino in comparison to the general population of 18 to 25 year–olds. Thus, sex and race (i.e., Black vs. White vs. Other) were included as covariates in all analyses to insure that these factors did not account for the differences in trends based on college plans.

*Analytic Strategy*

To examine the significance of time trends and group differences, logistic regression models were estimated for each dichotomous item. College aspirations, sex, race, and year were entered into models as categorical predictors. Our sample size of nearly 100,000 youth means that even small effects usually reach statistical significance. All time trends yielded significant improvement to model fit beyond demographics of college aspirations, sex, and race (in all cases Wald  $\chi^2$  values exceeded 359,  $df = 29$ ). Based on baseline models and the extant literature, we included race and sex as controls when interpreting findings relevant to college aspirations.

In light of the association between youths' college plans and their parents' educational attainment (e.g., Perna, 2000), we conducted a parallel set of analyses to examine whether the trends based on youths' college aspirations mirrored the trends based on parents' education (i.e., high school diploma or less vs. more than a high school diploma). The analyses revealed a very similar pattern for the two variables, despite the relatively low correlation between them (average phi correlation across years = .24). We chose to present comparisons based on youths' college aspirations both because they more clearly differentiate trends in our civic engagement measures and because we are more interested in youths' future orientations than in their origins.

## Results

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

### *Forms of Civic and Political Engagement*

Consistent with popular perception, the data reveal declines in adolescents' conventional and alternative civic participation (see Figure 1). Trends in conventional participation peaked in 1977/1978 when 27% of respondents said they had, or intended to, engage in conventional activities such as writing to public officials, giving money to political candidates or a cause, and working in a political campaign. From this point onward, conventional participation steadily

waned until it reached a low in the first part of the new millennium (i.e., 2001-2002) when only 17% of high school seniors endorsed these conventional forms of participation. Participation in alternative forms of engagement declined precipitously during the early 1980s, as it fell from its near-high of 28% in 1977 to a record low of 17% from 1984 to 1986. Subsequently, these trends diverged, with a steep increase in young people's willingness to engage in lawful demonstrations and boycotts from 1989 (21%) to 1992 (29%) before the trend again receded towards a low of 20% in 2005. In contrast, conventional engagement remained stable with some decline during the period between 1988 and 2004, before a slight upturn in 2005.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Trends in voting and intentions to vote over 30 years are presented in Figure 2. As this graph shows, across these years 83–90% of high school seniors reported that they intended to vote or had already voted in public elections. With its stable high level, the voting trend is clearly distinct from trends in other types of conventional and alternative engagement. To contextualize the trend in voting, in Figure 2 we juxtapose it with Lopez and colleagues' (2005) estimates, based on analyses of the Current Population Survey of voter turnout for people ages 18 to 24. While upwards of 85% of high school seniors in our study reported that they voted or intended to vote in elections, actual voter turnout rates for young adults wavered between 21–29% for midterm elections and 40–54% in Presidential elections in the period stretching from 1976 to 2004.

Until 1990, the percentage of high school seniors who reported participating in community service activities at least once per month remained stable at around 23%, but it increased steadily and dramatically from 21% in 1990 to 34% by 2005 (see Figure 1). Examining trends in high school seniors' conventional, alternative, and community service participation in

tandem (see Figure 1) reveals that in the last 15 years high school seniors have been less and less likely to endorse alternative political engagement activities, their support for conventional political engagement remained considerably lower than in the previous 15 years, and yet at the same time they were becoming much more likely to volunteer in their communities.

[INSERT FIGURE 3]

#### *Interest in Government and Current Events*

As another civic indicator, we examined high school seniors' self-reported interest in government and current events. In contrast to the popular belief that young people are not interested in the news and government, high school seniors report fairly high levels of interest in local and national events and the activities of the government. The percentage of participants who reported some, a lot, or great interest in the government and current events between 1976 and 2005 ranged from 83% (1980; 1981) to 67% (2000). The trend shown in Figure 3 revealed that, although high, there are small yet noticeable spikes in high school seniors' interest in current events and government. These peaks appear to be tracking high profile national events and times of crisis. While our data do not allow us to causally link young people's interest in government and the news to specific events, a pot hoc historical review suggests that these trends may be linked to events such as the peak of Cold War tensions (1980), the Challenger explosion and Iran Contra (1986), and the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks (2001).

[INSERT FIGURE 4]

#### *Trust in the Government and Public Hope*

Regarding high school seniors' trust in the government, we found that in most years only a minority of young people (average across years: 44%; range: 30-61%) believe that candidates for political office are honest and that the government can be trusted to do the right thing. As

illustrated in Figure 4, trust in the government peaked in 1986 (61%) before dropping 31 percentage points to its lowest point in 1994, and slowly rebounding across the 1990s. Given young people's general skepticism about elected officials and the US government, it is not surprising that they remain similarly cautious about their outlook on the world. Oscillating between 34 – 48% (see Figure 4), the trend in holding hope for the world was at its lowest in the mid-1990s but has recovered somewhat in the first part of the new millennium. Comparing trends in these two variables (see Figure 4) revealed a strong similarity in patterns over time ( $r = .85$ ), with peaks and valleys occurring in the same spans for both, but more extreme changes between them for trust in government than for public hope. In other words, at times when young people felt the government and elected officials could be trusted, they also tended to express more hope for the world.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

#### *Differences in Trends by College Aspirations*

Next, we examine trends in these same variables for high school seniors with 4-year, 2-year and no college aspirations, controlling for race, sex, and the time trend (see Table 1 for coefficients). In cases where differences appeared to change over time, we tested interactions between year and college aspirations.

*Main Effects.* Averaging responses across years, youth with aspirations to graduate from 4-year and 2-year colleges had higher odds of endorsing the whole range of civic indicators, compared to youth with no college plans. Table 1 summarizes findings from these analyses.

Youth with 4-year college aspirations had about two to three times greater odds than those with no college plans to engage in conventional and alternative civic activities such as writing to public officials and boycotting products or stores. Likewise, they had four times

greater odds of voting compared to non-college bound youth. They also had substantially (75% to 100%) higher odds of engaging in community service on a monthly basis, reporting interest in government and current events, and holding hope for the world. Though also statistically significant, the difference in trust in government was modest (25% higher odds). While youth with 2-year college aspirations also had significantly higher odds of endorsing each of these civic indicators than youth with no college plans, the differences were considerably smaller than for those with 4-year aspirations. In fact, youth with 2-year plans had significantly lower odds of endorsing these civic attitudes and behaviors compared to youth with 4-year plans (*ORs* range from .45 to .92, all  $p$ 's < .001, not reported in Table 1).

*Interactions with year.* Initial differences between participants with varying college aspirations appeared to grow over time in trends for voting and community service,<sup>4</sup> the most notable of this change appeared to occur around 1990.

[INSERT FIGURE 5]

While voting trends for youth with 4-year plans and no college plans remained relatively stable across time, differing mainly by level, the trend for youth with 2-year plans has fallen off since the mid-1980s (see Figure 5). We tested whether the gap between respondents with 4-year plans and 2-year plans diverged across the 30-year period by entering interactions between year (linear term, centered at 1990) and youths' college aspirations into the logistic regression models. Compared to youth with 4-year college plans (the reference group in this model), in 1990 youth with 2-year plans had 50% lower odds ( $OR = .51, p < .001$ ), and youth with no college plans had 70% lower odds ( $OR = .29, p < .001$ ), of endorsing voting. Interactions between college aspirations and the linear term for year of data collection confirmed significant growth between 1976 and 2005 in the gap in voting intentions between youth with 4-year and 2-

year college plans ( $\beta = -.013$ ,  $SE = .004$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not in the gap between those with 4-year and no college plans ( $\beta = -.001$ ,  $SE = .003$ ,  $p = .713$ ). Indeed, while the trend for 4-year college aspirants showed a net decline of 3% across the 30 years, that for 2-year college aspirants declined by 9%, and for respondents with no plans the decline was only 1% across the same period. In other words, although there has consistently been a gap in voting intentions based on youths' college plans, from 1990 to 2005 the gap between youth with 4-year plans and youth with 2-year plans has grown.

[INSERT FIGURE 6]

Regarding trends for youth participation in community service, it appears that since 1990, the gap between 4-year college bound youths' community service and that of their 2-year and non-college bound peers has widened (see Figure 6). We tested the significance of this growth in the post-1990 divide by adding interactions between year (dichotomously coded: pre-1990 = 0 vs. 1990 and later = 1) and college aspirations in the logistic regression model. This analysis revealed a significant interaction between dichotomous year (pre-1990 v. 1990 or later) and 2-year college aspirations ( $\beta = -.358$ ,  $SE = .051$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as no college plans ( $\beta = -.123$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .002$ ). As noted and shown in Figure 6, community service levels were stable for all three groups between 1976 and 1990. Across these years, youth with 2-year plans had about 30% lower odds ( $OR = .710$ ,  $SE = .033$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and youth with no college plans had about 40% lower odds ( $OR = .582$ ,  $SE = .028$ ,  $p < .001$ ) of participating in community service at least once per month compared to youth with 4-year plans, and average levels were 18%, 20%, and 27% participation for youth with no plans, 2-year, and 4-year plans, respectively. However, from 1991 to 2005, youth with 4-year plans showed a large and steady increase and ended at a higher level compared to the smaller and more volatile increases for youth with 2-year and no plans. In 2005,

youth with 4-year plans reached 37% participation, while youth with 2-year plans reached 20% and youth with no plans ended at 29% (although the average from 2003-2005 was closer to 24%). Thus, although rates of participation in community service increased for all youth, rates for youth with 4-year college aspirations increased considerably more than for their peers with other post-high school plans, thereby widening the gap between young people with different college aspirations.

### Discussion

The breadth of the Monitoring the Future data allowed us to look at patterns in high school seniors' civic and political intentions, behaviors, and attitudes over a 30-year period and to tease apart differences based on youths' college aspirations. Consistent with other national reports (e.g., Keeter et al., 2002), our results suggest that more recent cohorts are, generally, less inclined to be interested in conventional and alternative forms of political participation. However, we find that high school seniors are increasingly drawn toward activities where they are able to serve their communities on a regular basis. We also found that these trends vary substantially based on youths' college plans. Across the past three decades, youth with no or 2-year college plans have been consistently less likely to engage in civic and political activities and less likely to volunteer in their communities than their peers with 4-year college aspirations. In addition, our findings reveal that youth with 4-year college plans have been more likely to report that they will vote in future elections and express greater interest in government and current affairs. Furthermore, youth with no or 2-year college plans have typically trusted the government somewhat less and held less hope for the world. Perhaps most alarming, however, was evidence that a few of these gaps have grown.

#### *Forms of Civic and Political Engagement*

Some scholars have argued that young people are substituting conventional forms of political participation with more community-oriented activities as youth come to increasingly characterize the former as “self-absorbed and unrelated to their deeper ideals” (Galston, 2004; p. 263). Though we found that civic engagement (conventional and alternative) and community service have trended in opposite directions, our data cannot speak to causality. For some, who view political engagement and service to the community as competing endeavors, these findings may suggest the need to renew civic education efforts that reinforce the value of traditional forms of participation (e.g., Torney-Purta, 2002). In contrast, those who define civic participation more broadly might view these findings as a reflection of the ways in which young people are choosing to redefine civic engagement (Delli Carpini, 2000; Kiesa et al., 2007). The increasing trend in community service also reflects the institutionalization of service learning in K-12 schools (Education Commission of the States, 2007).

Our results also show that civic engagement and service vary by youths’ college aspirations. Our findings indicate that youth with no or 2-year college plans lag behind their peers with 4-year aspirations in intended conventional and alternative political participation. Further, we found a stark contrast in the community service trends of those with no, 2-, and 4-year college plans: the general trend in service across time is increasing but is primarily being driven by those youth headed to 4-year colleges. The trend of increased community service seems likely to result, at least in part, from the institutionalization of encouragement or even mandates for community service (e.g., as a graduation requirement). Others have raised motivational issues about community service, arguing based on interviews with high school students that those applying to 4-year colleges are padding their resumes with community service (see Friedland & Morimoto, 2005). Still others have documented differences in the service-

learning and community outreach opportunities made available to youth on different academic tracks (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004; Skinner & Chapman, 1999).

Overall, voting is highly endorsed by high school seniors. Contrasting these trends with actual voter turnout rates, however, tells a wholly different story: only one-third of youth actually act on their intention to vote, suggesting that youths' responses reflect more of a normative goal of "good" citizenship. Voting trends also vary based on youths' college plans such that those with no or 2-year plans are less likely to say they will cast a ballot than their peers with 4-year ambitions. Further, while intentions to vote have remained fairly stable across the past 30 years for youth with 4-year college plans and those with no college plans, the trend for youth with 2-year college plans has decreased sharply to the point that it almost reaches the level for youth with no college plans.

Promisingly, data from the 2006 and 2008 election cycles reveal an uptick in young voter turnout (see Kirby, Marcelo, Gillerman, & Linkins, 2008). Two consequences of the contentious 2000 Bush-Gore race may account for the recent surge in youth voting: politicians increased their attention to young and first-time voters, and young voters now readily understand the value of their vote. While this increase holds regardless of youths' educational backgrounds, the general pattern observed from 1976 to 2005 still remains: youth with more education are more likely to vote (Lopez, Marcelo, & Kirby, 2007).

#### *Interest in Government and Current Events*

Our data do not support the popular opinion that young people lack interest in current affairs and the government, although there do appear to be noteworthy differences based on youths' college aspirations: the higher youths' college aspirations, the more likely they are to express interest in their world and the government. Interest in a topic is often thought to motivate

learning about the topic and to be a correlate of one's behavior. Yet, research suggests that young people possess little information about events happening in their neighborhood, world, and government (e.g., Niemi & Junn, 1998; The National Geographic Education Foundation, 2006), signifying a disconnect between youths' self-reported interest in and knowledge about these subjects. Part of this may stem from the wording of the question which compounds current events with government and fails to clarify the former which may, in the mind's eye of many high school seniors, equate to events in their local communities, school, or in pop culture; topics which are not measured in national civic knowledge exams.

### *Trust in the Government and Public Hope*

Moving beyond youths' intended civic and political engagement, we also considered youths' trust in the government and their hope for the world more generally. Though young people's trust in the government and elected officials has waxed and waned across the 30-year period, it has remained low throughout. Commonly cited explanations for young people's distrust of government and elected officials include their collective feelings of alienation, believing that their voices are not heard, dissatisfaction with political corruption, and the devaluing of the public sector (e.g., Delli Carpini, 2000; National Association of Secretaries of State, 2000; Pew Foundation, 1998). Yet, despite this distrust, research comparing younger generations (i.e., Dot Nets) with older generations suggest the former hold higher expectations for the government to help solve problems (Keeter et al., 2002). The failure of the government to fulfill these expectations may, in part, explain younger generations' misgivings when it comes to the government and elected officials.

Congruent trends in young people's trust in government and hope for the world paint a fairly somber picture of the civic landscape, especially during the mid-1990s when trust and

hope were hard to find (interesting, this is also the period in which support for alternative forms of engagement surged and support for conventional political activities bottomed out). Even though we cannot discern a causal relationship, it is clear that youths' trust in government and hopeful beliefs for the world are entwined. In fact, it is this combination that resonated with young voters during the 2008 presidential campaign. Finding that more than half of respondents report it is hard to hold hope for the world and only slightly more trust our government is disconcerting but provides an additional lens for understanding youths' civic and political behaviors.

### *Divergent Paths*

High school students' educational aspirations provide unique insight into how they imagine their possible selves and possible futures and, consequently, make it an interesting measure by which to compare trends. For two of the civic engagement trends we examined, voting and community service, we found a growing divergence between youth planning to graduate from college and youth with no college aspirations or 2-year college plans. Youth who plan to earn a 4-year college degree, which is correlated with both social class background and prospects in adulthood, have reported stronger intentions to vote and more actual participation in community affairs throughout this 30-year study. These patterns offer further support for the documented phenomenon of a civic divide between social classes (Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004; Flanagan & Campbell, 2003; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Verba et al., 1995). Our findings also offer new empirical evidence of a *growing* civic divide (see also National Conference on Citizenship, 2006). Civic inequality may stem from educational inequality, as research has shown that opportunities to learn about and practice citizenship are more prevalent in higher income districts and for students who are already planning to attend college (Kahne &

Middaugh, 2008). A democratic society should be concerned by these trends, as they suggest we are preparing some youth to be engaged in politics and community affairs, while others are left behind.

### *Caveats*

When interpreting the results of this study, it is important to keep a few caveats in mind. First, though the Monitoring the Future datasets include a variety of items that assess young people's civic participation, they still do not fully measure the breadth of young people's civic participation. Indeed, civic engagement is continually being (*re*)invented by new cohorts of young people, often by taking advantage of technological innovations (e.g., Levine, 2006; Youniss et al., 2002). This evolution in forms of participation poses a problem for the study of social change because analysis of time trends necessitates that researchers use the same items across time.

It is also important to call attention to the future orientation of the college aspiration items (i.e., "plan to graduate"). While many youth indicate that they plan to graduate from a 4-year institution, statistics from the U.S. Department of Education suggest that only about half of students actually complete their program within five years, while many others leave without receiving a degree (Wirt et al., 2004). Thus, our measure of college plans reflects an aspiration, not an achievement. It is telling that even youths' plans for college so strongly differentiate their civic views and behaviors, perhaps because young people's college aspirations are a central feature of their "possible selves," identity, or place in the body politic. Note that longitudinal studies linking educational attainment to similar civic engagement and attitudes measures have also found comparable disparities (e.g., Verba et al., 2003), indicating that the patterns we identified for educational aspirations continue into later ages.

## *Conclusions*

Our results present a complicated picture of social change in American youths' civic engagement over the last 30 years. While engagement decreased in some areas, it increased in others. Notably, the typical pattern of change was not the steady upward or downward trend often portrayed in prominent commentaries on social life (e.g., Putnam, 2000), but rather it included multiple reversals and short-term plateaus. For all that is written about "youth today," it is surprising how little empirical information we have about historical change in their attitudes and behavior, even for recent times.

Comparisons based on youths' educational aspirations further illustrate diverse participation among cohorts of young people. Youth who do not have 4-year college plans are less likely to engage in conventional and alternative forms of political participation, vote, participate in monthly community service, express interest in the government and current affairs, and to feel a sense of trust in the government and of hope for the world. The extent to which these differences stem from family or institutionalized discrimination is unclear but not beyond remedy. Our findings suggest that understanding and explaining this fundamental aspect of social life is a complex challenge that deserves greater attention. As custodians of our democracy, it would behoove us as a society to engage *all* young people – regardless of their college aspirations – in their schools, communities, and world and empower them with the skills, creativity, and, hope necessary to be active participants in our democracy.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Due to this timing only students who are still enrolled in high school in the spring of their senior year are included in the survey. Thus, almost all of the respondents will earn their high school diplomas and the sample effectively excludes high school dropouts.

<sup>2</sup> In other words, we computed these correlations and alpha coefficients by computing annual means for each item and treating each year as a single case or unit of analysis. However, we also provide the individual-level relationships here for interested readers: Conventional Engagement ( $\alpha$  averaged across years = .53); Alternative Engagement (correlation averaged across years = .40); Trust in the Government (correlation averaged across years = .27).

<sup>3</sup> We are mindful that placing youth into these three groups does not fully explore the plurality of youths' post-high school plans, but relatively few have plans for training other than college. For instance, in 2005 only 4.3% indicate that they are likely to complete training for the Armed Forces or at a vocational/technical program, but not attend college. Thus, we believe our categorization adequately reflects the intentions of the majority of youth and captures the primary distinctions in the educational aspirations and expectations of youth in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Interactions between year and college aspirations were tested only for those civic indicators that appeared graphically to change over time.

Figure 1.

*Trends in Youths' Conventional, Alternative, and Community Service Participation.*

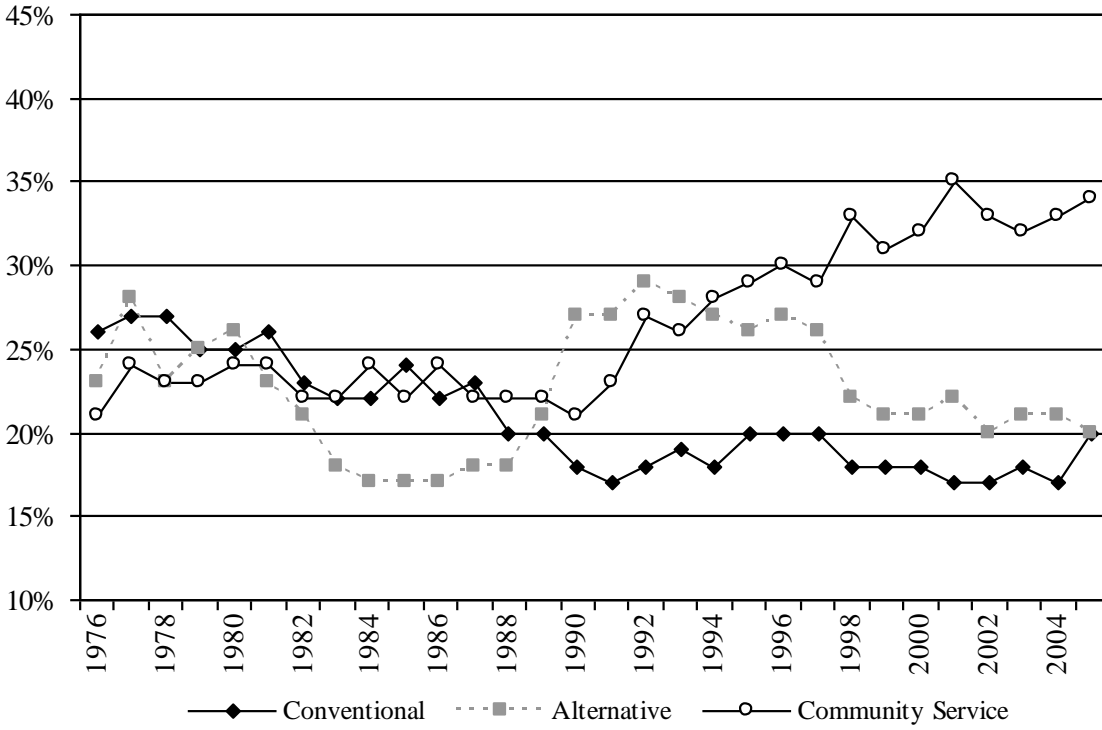
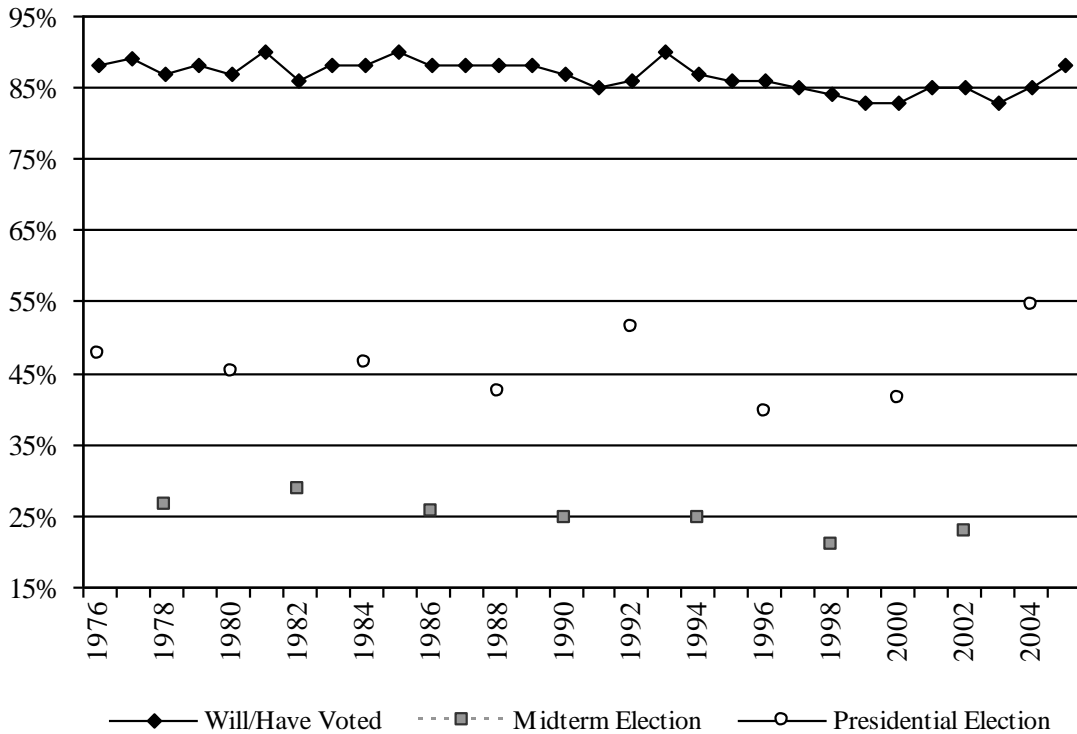


Figure 2.

*Trends in Youths' Intentions to Vote in Public Elections and Actual Midterm and Presidential Election Voter Turnout among Citizens ages 18 to 24.*



*Note.* The voter turnout rates reported in this study were estimated by Lopez and colleagues (2005) using the Current Population Survey (i.e., not the same population as the current study). These estimates are publicly available on the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement website (CIRCLE; [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)) and represent CIRCLE's method of calculating voter turnout.

Figure 3.

*Trend in Interest in Government and Current Events*

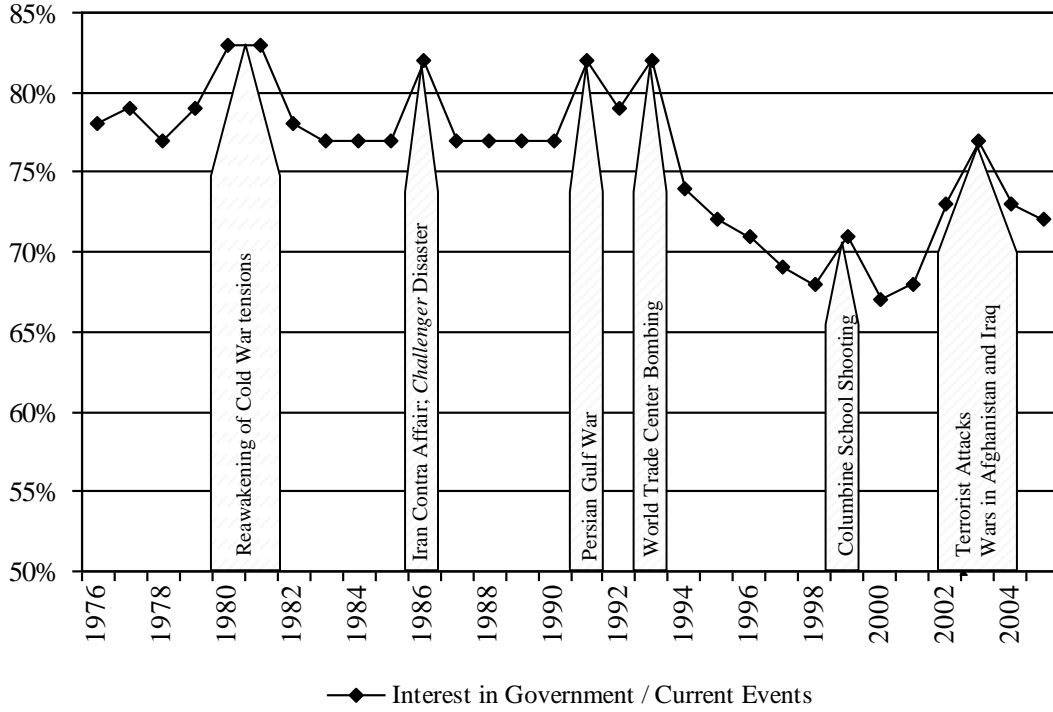


Figure 4.

*Trends in Youths' Public Hope and Trust in Government and Elected Officials.*

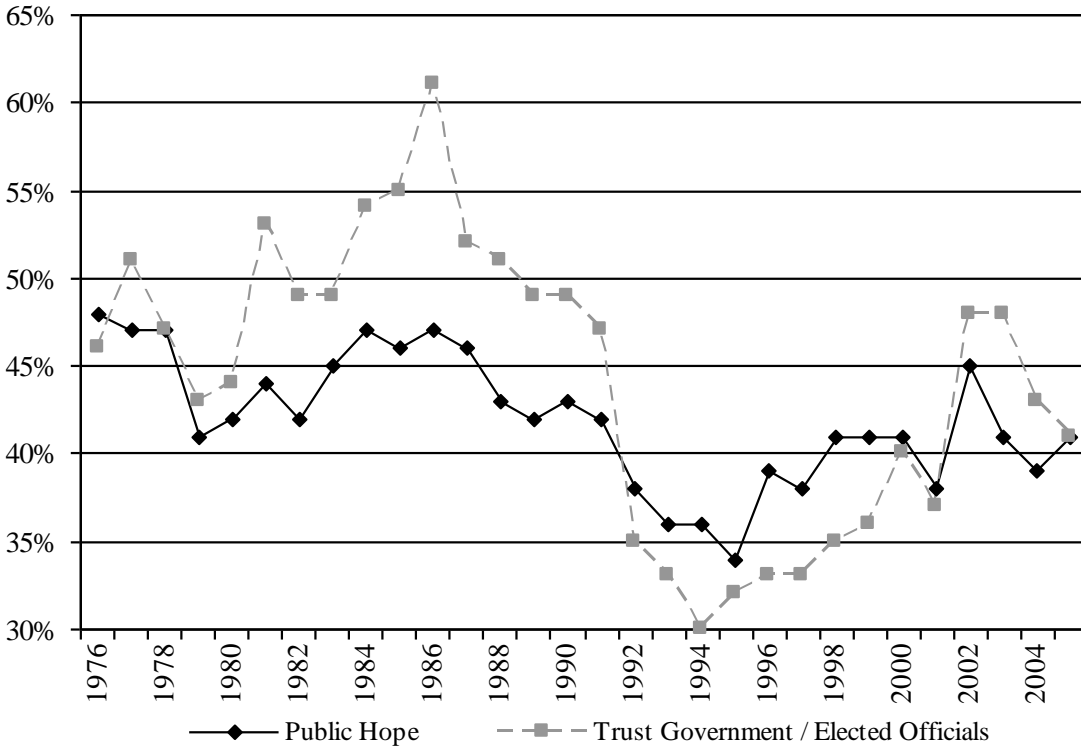


Table 1.

*Main Effects of College Aspirations for Civic Indicators.*

	Beta	Odds Ratio	SE	p-value
<b>Conventional Engagement</b>				
<i>Write to public officials</i>				
4-year plans	1.03	2.80	.023	<.001
2-year plans	.277	1.32	.030	<.001
<i>Give money to candidate or cause</i>				
4-year plans	.672	1.96	.026	<.001
2-year plans	.190	1.21	.034	<.001
<i>Work in a political campaign</i>				
4-year plans	1.10	3.00	.033	<.001
2-year plans	.340	1.40	.044	<.001
<b>Voting</b>				
4-year plans	1.42	4.14	.026	<.001
2-year plans	.627	1.87	.032	<.001
<b>Alternative Engagement</b>				
<i>Participate in lawful demonstration</i>				
4-year plans	.776	2.17	.027	<.001
2-year plans	.255	1.29	.035	<.001
<i>Boycott products or stores</i>				
4-year plans	.716	2.05	.024	<.001
2-year plans	.185	1.20	.032	<.001
<b>Community Service</b>				
4-year plans	.667	1.95	.024	<.001
2-year plans	.124	1.13	.032	<.001
<b>Interest in Government and Current Events</b>				
4-year plans	1.04	2.03	.021	<.001
2-year plans	.436	1.55	.027	<.001
<b>Trust in Government</b>				
<i>Officials are crooked (reversed)</i>				
4-year plans	.221	1.25	.019	<.001
2-year plans	.137	1.15	.025	<.001
<i>Government will do what is right</i>				
4-year plans	.573	1.77	.020	<.001
2-year plans	.216	1.24	.026	<.001
<b>Public Hope</b>				
4-year plans	.639	1.89	.021	<.001
2-year plans	.123	1.13	.027	<.001

*Notes.* Year, race, and sex were included as categorical variables in all models, but effects are not shown. Reference groups: Youth with no college plans, White youth, and females.

Figure 5.

*Trends in Youths' Intentions to Vote in Public Elections by College Aspirations.*

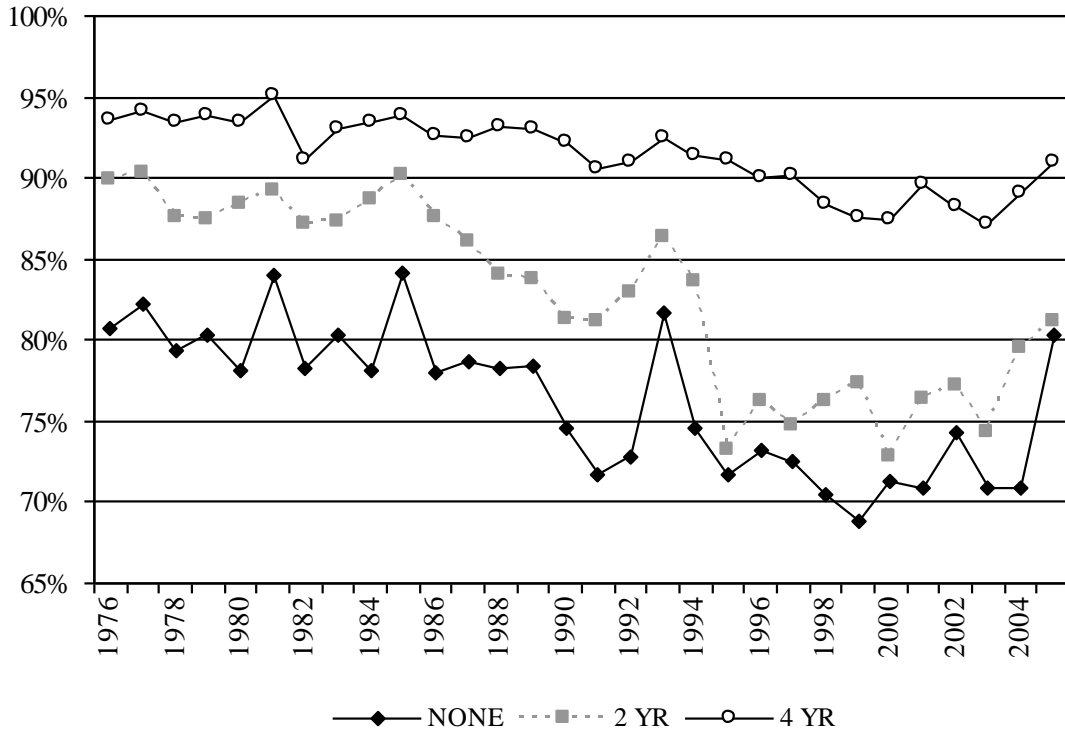


Figure 6.

*Trends in Youths' Community Service by College Aspirations.*

