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## Generations and Politics Thirty-Year Trends in Youth Civic Interest and Engagement

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Much has been made of declines in younger generations' political engagement. Despite the recent uptick in excitement during the 2008 presidential election, it is widely thought that youth today are less interested in current events, electoral politics, and the affairs of their communities than the generations of youth who preceded them.

In their recent article, Network members Constance Flanagan and Wayne Osgood, along with Amy Syvertsen, Laura Wray-Lake, and Laine Briddell, uncover another wrinkle in the story: a growing class divide in civic participation.

The authors compare changing political beliefs and anticipated political participation between high school seniors who are and are not bound for college, since the 1970s. They follow trends in teens' intentions to vote; participation in conventional political activities, such as writing to candidates, working for and giving money to campaigns; engagement in alternative political activities, such as boycotting and demonstrating; community service; trust in government; and sense of hope for the world.

To track trends, the authors use a nationally representative, annual survey of high school seniors in public and private high schools across the country. The Monitoring the Future Survey has traced high school seniors' (age 17-19) beliefs and activities from 1976 through today. The authors used data on civic and political participation from 1976 through 2005.<sup>1</sup>

### Young People's Political Detachment Started in the 1980s

Teens have steadily backed away from conventional political participation. The highpoint of teen involvement was in 1978, five years after President Nixon had resigned and two years into Jimmy Carter's presidency (and one year before the hostages were taken in Iran). Even at its highpoint, however, only 27% of teens said they had or intended to write to a public official, give money to political candidates or a cause, or work in a political campaign. By the 2001-2002 school year—and shortly after 9/11—such participation reached its nadir, at 17%. The relatively low involvement of high school seniors in conventional politics is no surprise. Regardless of the era, youth are less likely than their elders to be settled into roles and to be stakeholders in their communities. But that doesn't mean young people are uninterested in politics, only that the form of their involvement may differ from that of their elders.

However, even alternative forms of engagement—such as boycotting and demonstrating—declined among high school seniors during the 1980s, reaching a low of 17% in 1986. Interest in alternative acts revived somewhat in the 1990s, bouncing to 29% in 1992 before settling at around 20% during the late 1990s through 2005.

Youths' intention to vote shows a more hopeful sign. More than 8 in 10 high school seniors reported they had voted or intended to vote in elections. Such intentions reveal that youth consider voting something citizens should do.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Monitoring the Future, visit their website at <http://monitoringthefuture.org/>.

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However, intentions do not always convert to action. Voter turnout rates for young adults wavered between 40% and 54% in presidential elections between 1976 and 2004.

Of course, voting and protesting are not the only forms of civic action. An ethos of giving back to one's community began to take hold in the early 1990s, perhaps owing to the rise of service-learning in schools. After years of holding steady, the share of teens reporting they volunteered at least once a month rose significantly between 1990 and 2005, from 21% to 34%.

## Participation Gap Widens between College-Bound and Noncollege-Bound

The trends reveal the persistence of a large class divide in civic participation. Young people bound for four-year colleges have been consistently more engaged in politics, both conventional and alternative, and more often volunteer in their communities than those heading to two-year colleges or those with no plans to attend college. These results hold even after controlling for gender, race, and are consistent over time. Interestingly, the authors find only modest differences in trust in government between the three groups.

Furthermore, the class divide has widened in recent years. The gap by education plans grew over time for voting, most notably around 1990. The most significant (9%) decline in plans to vote between 1976 and 2005 was among those headed to two-year colleges, while the other two groups' intentions held fairly steady. Although the education divide in civic participation has existed for decades, these results point to a growing divide even for those youth who plan to go on for a two-year degree.

Community service has diverged by class as well. Although everyone increased their community service, four-year-college-bound students were much more likely over the 30 years to volunteer in their communities. This gap began to widen further after 1990, around the time community service became a frequent requirement for high school graduation. By 2005, 37% of those with four-year college plans volunteered at least once a month, while 20% of those with two-year plans, and 29% of those with no college plans volunteered. Given that more high school seniors are planning to graduate from a four-year college than ever before, the youth with two-year plans may be more similar in class and opportunities to the noncollege-bound youth. This could explain why these two groups also look increasingly similar in voting intentions and community service.

## Civic Inequality?

Possible reasons for this growing divide by education plans lie in the opportunities that college offers and the resources available in young people's high schools. One study, for example, found that lower-income schools (which traditionally have fewer college-bound students) had fewer service-learning and community outreach opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Schools with more students bound for college also tend to offer more opportunities to practice civic skills, such as in mock trials.

In addition, the family environment may contribute to the divide. College aspirations often align with parents' income and education, and families with fewer resources also are likely to live in communities with fewer financial and social resources. Lower-income communities tend to have a higher child-to-adult ratio.<sup>3</sup> Thus, there are fewer adults available to volunteer in community-based youth groups and fewer opportunities for young people to engage in their communities.

This growing civic inequality is a concern in a democratic society, as it suggests we are preparing an elite to participate in public and community affairs while others are left behind. Given that organizations and institutions are

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kahne and E. Middaugh, "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School." Working paper 59 (College Park, MD: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, February 2008); Constitutional Rights Foundation, *Educating for Democracy: The California Campaign for the Civic Mission of School: The California Survey of Civic Education* (Los Angeles, CRF, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> D. Hart and R. Atkins, "Civic Competence in Urban Youth," *Applied Developmental Science*, 6 (2002), 227-236.

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The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

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the main venues that recruit both younger and older generations into civic life, we should pay more attention to the institutional opportunities available for youth who do not continue on to four-year colleges.

## Redefining “Civic”?

Overall, these findings point to ebbs and flows in civic engagement, such as in political participation, trust in government, and community service. Some might argue that the overall declines in civic and political engagement call for renewed civic education that reinforces traditional forms of participation. Others might see this trend as a reflection of young people redefining civic engagement. Either of these could be true; these results demonstrate the importance of examining trends with a historical lens in order to see whether changes in youth’s civic engagement are temporary or here to stay.

For example, a recent study shows that approximately one-third of today’s young people (age 15 to 26) have participated in a boycott or “buycott” (that is, they 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. Our study shows that alternative political actions surged in the mid-to-late 1990s, yet declined in recent years. These trends thus may have only been a temporary blip on the historical radar rather than new way of engaging. Online political participation has also surged, and represents an important direction for future research.<sup>4</sup>

The findings strongly suggest that young people’s trust in government is quite dismal. Low trust in the government is problematic, given that trust is a foundation for conventional political participation. In the future, it will be important to examine whether this pessimism has turned around since the last presidential election.

The era in which generations come of age has a lasting impact on their civic character. Adolescence, when youth are in the throes of forming their identity, presents 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. Although the most recent election showed hopeful signs of a reemerging engagement, it is imperative to a well-oiled democracy that we reach *all* youth, not just the university-bound, and rethink how we engage young people in civic life.

*Based on the authors’ 2009 working paper, “Thirty-Year Trends in American Adolescents’ Civic Engagement.”*

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<sup>4</sup> M. H. Lopez et al., *The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Detailed Look At How Youth Participate in Politics and Communities* (College Park, MD: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, October 2006).

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