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**Issue: Volume 36 - Issue 02 - April 2003**

**Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics***



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# Habits from Home, Lessons from School: Influences on Youth Civic Engagement

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## Introduction

Civic engagement among America's youth is a hot topic—and not solely in the world of academia. Government officials, non-profit agencies and grass roots organizations have spent considerable time and energy trying to spur participation among the post-Generation X cohort. Candidates have created web sites promoting youth understanding of political issues. State governments have established volunteer requirements for high school graduations. Activist organizations have targeted young adults for voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives. Others have asked youth to sign email petitions or participate in boycotts.

This research suggests that their work may be paying off. Using two new data sources, we demonstrate how organizations and schools, along with families, play key roles in spurring the participation of today's 15–25 year olds. Habits formed at home, lessons learned at school, and opportunities offered by outside groups all positively influence the civic engagement of youth.

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## The Legacy of Political Socialization

The study of youth civic engagement falls within the larger field of political socialization. Early socialization research focused on elementary school children, rather than teenagers (Greenstein 1965; Hess and Torney 1967; Dawson and Easton 1969; Easton and Dennis 1969). Scholars were guided by their belief in the primacy principle—the notion that the lessons of early childhood shape the attitudes and behavior of individuals as they age (Searing et al. 1973). Reliance on this principle—and the accompanying focus on children—wavered as the subject itself matured and subsequent research brought evidence of change over the course of one's life (Marsh 1971; Niemi and Sobieszek 1977; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Lindbloom 1982; Cook 1985; Rosenberg 1985; Connell 1987). Scholars reworked their frameworks to account for both stability and change (Delli Carpini 1986; Sigel 1989) and shifted their focus from the elementary school years to Mannheim's ([1928] 1952) "impressionable years"—the period from late adolescence to early adulthood when individuals develop political habits that will continue to influence them throughout the course of their lives (Jennings and Niemi 1974; 1981).

In addition to widening the ages considered amenable to socialization, recent work has reinvigorated the examination of schools as socializing agents. Although early studies argued that the family, schools, and peers were all agents of socialization, much of the initial research focused on the influence of the family, especially parents (for a review, see Niemi 1973 and Niemi and Sobieszek 1977). The decentralized nature of education in the US made generalizations across school systems (even across classrooms) cumbersome and hindered scholars' ability to conduct systematic studies of the impact of schools (Niemi 1973). However, while research continues to identify the family as a key socializer (e.g., Lake Snell Perry and Associates 2002), it has also identified

the socializing effect of other institutions, such as churches (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), and reopened the issue of the role of our schools.

## Socialization Lessons for Civic Engagement

Socialization scholars have provided evidence that civic training in adolescence can influence adult behavior. Young people who volunteer in high school and college are more likely than their non-volunteering counterparts to engage in volunteering, community activities, and other forms of civic life as adults. Involvement in after-school activities also plays a role. Individuals who were active in school organizations (except athletics) as teenagers are disproportionately more involved as adults, even when the impact of later influences such as marriage, children, and advanced education are taken into account (Kirlin 2002; Conway and Damico 2001; Flanagan and Faison 2001; Wilson 2000; Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999; Youniss et al. 1997; Verba et al. 1995). Research suggests that of these two routes to civic behavior, participation in high school organizations (especially student-led groups) is a better training ground for later civic engagement than are early volunteering or service learning experiences (Perry and Katula 2001; Kirlin 2002). Finally, scholars have documented that the connection between high school activities and later civic involvement is not linear—activists in high school are more likely than their less active counterparts to be involved as adults, but only after a "sleeping" period in which they are relatively disconnected from civic life (Jennings and Stoker 2001).

While this research provides much insight into the lasting effect of teenage activities, many questions still remain. For example, while scholars have established links between service learning in high school and volunteering in adulthood, and others have documented the connection between high school organizational involvement and later associational affiliation, there has been much

less attention given to the relationship between service learning programs and later *political* (as opposed to civic) behavior (Perry and Katula 2001). Even more critical, perhaps, is the paucity of evidence about what promotes involvement among adolescents (Galston 2001).<sup>1</sup>

## The Research Design

This paper draws on data from a large, multi-phase study of civic engagement in America that explores both the overall state of civic and political engagement nationwide, and the distinct paths to participation among young adults. A key outcome of this study is a set of indicators that provides a reliable, replicable measurement of civic engagement. To ensure that our measures include an accurate picture of the youngest age cohorts, we began our research with a series of qualitative studies designed to explore the political orientations and behavior of today's youth. We next built on the lessons from the qualitative work to develop a series of quantitative indicators, which we tested on various populations through telephone and Internet surveys. Finally, we used the results of these experiments to create a survey instrument designed to

measure civic and political engagement among all generations, which was administered by phone last spring.

The analysis in this paper involves two data sources. The first is a survey of 1,001 people, aged 15–25, which is a subset of the total sample of 3,246 respondents ages 15 and older, interviewed by SRBI, Inc., in April and May 2002. The second is a survey of 1,166 randomly selected young people, also aged 15–25, administered by Knowledge Networks via Web-TV in February 2002.<sup>2</sup> Both data sets were weighted so that the sample reflects the national

### Habits of the Home

	Heard Pol. Talk in Household		Someone Volunteered	
	Never	Often	No	Yes
Regular Volunteer	13	35	15	31
Active in Group	16	10	15	32
Always Vote	20	38	26	41
Follows Politics	18	44	18	33
Boycotted	25	54	30	47
Signed Paper petition	11	30	17	25

Source: Authors' telephone survey of 1,001 youth aged 15–25

they were asked if they had done so in the past 12 months. Both surveys in-

**Among young people who are eligible to vote, 38% of those from homes with frequent political discussions say they always vote, compared to 20% of those without such dialogue.**

cluded measures of cognitive engagement (e.g., media attentiveness and political knowledge), and, for high school students, measures of engagement in high school activities. The Internet survey also asked

college students about college-specific activities.

college students about college-specific activities.

Since this study is based on cross-sectional surveys of a particular age group at approximately the same time, we are limited in our ability to draw causal inferences. In trying to infer the impact of past experiences on current behavior, we must rely on respondents' recollection of those experiences, such as their activities in high school. Another limitation is that our focus on the 15–25 year old cohort means that we do not address the longer term consequences of family and high school experiences.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, as with many studies about the role of schools in the political socialization of teenagers and adults, the decentralized nature of education in America poses particular difficulties. Our measures of school training, for example, document whether students are provided opportunities to discuss their service work in the classroom, but they cannot reveal the nature of that discussion, the skill with which a teacher facilitates talk, or the number of students in class.

Despite these obstacles, a major advantage of these two data sets is their large sample size, which allows us to analyze differences among groups within this age cohort. The surveys

population in terms of gender, race, education, and region. The telephone survey, specifically designed to capture the broad range of activities in which an individual could be involved, included a total of 19 measures of engagement ranging from electoral acts such as voting and wearing a campaign button to civic work such as volunteering for a nonpolitical organization to more alternative behaviors such as consumer boycotting, protesting, and sending email petitions. The Internet survey asked about a subset of these activities (nine of the 19). All respondents were asked if they had ever participated in each activity; if they answered affirmatively

All respondents were asked if they had ever participated in each activity; if they answered affirmatively



**Dinner Talk.** By talking about politics, families teach their children that is important to pay attention to the world around them. Photo: istockphoto.com/Mike Manzano.

### Encouraging and Requiring Service

	% Who Volunteer
High School Arranges Work	45
High School Does Not Arrange Work	33
High School Requires Work	59
High School Does Not Require Work	37
College Arranges Work	38
College Does Not Arrange Work	13

Source: Knowledge Networks survey of 1,166 youth aged 15–25

were also very extensive, providing a wide range of measures for the political, civic, and school-level engagement of young people today.

### What are Youth Doing?

The two surveys reveal a mixed image of the political and civic activism of today's young adults, who we have termed the DotNet generation.<sup>4</sup> While the youngest cohort is not as active as older Americans in some realms, they are equally or more active in other areas. For example, as other surveys have indicated, youth today are active volunteers, but not habitual voters. They score lower on tests of political knowledge and are less attentive to news about politics and government, but they

are at least as likely as the rest of the population to report boycotting a product or signing an email petition.<sup>5</sup>

Not all DotNets are equally engaged. For example, within the past 12 months, 40% have volunteered for a non-electoral group or organization, 38% have boycotted; 20% say that they generally wear a campaign button, display a yard sign, or post a bumper sticker on their car during election campaigns. But just 6% have done all three things. What distinguishes these engaged youths (in one or multiple activities) from their less active counterparts? This research begins to answer that question.

Previous research has established the positive link between political participation and such factors as higher income, advanced education, and strong religiosity. These factors influence the youngest cohort as well, but they are less significant than the impact of good role models at home, skills training in schools, and the simple invitation from an outside group or individual.

### Charity Begins at Home

Many of the important lessons for engagement are learned at home. Young adults who grow up amid regular political discussions are much more involved in a host of activities. For example, among young people who are eligible to vote, 38% of those from homes with frequent political discussions say they always vote, compared to 20% of those

### Classrooms Open for Ideas and Debate

	High School	College
Teachers offer open discussions. . . .		
Often	49	47
Sometimes	27	32
Rarely	18	11
Never	4	4
Dk/Ref	2	6
	100	100
Students are encouraged to make up their minds. . . .		
Often	54	70
Sometimes	32	21
Rarely	12	6
Never	1	2
Dk/Ref	2	1
	100	100

Source: Knowledge Networks survey of 1,166 youth aged 15–25

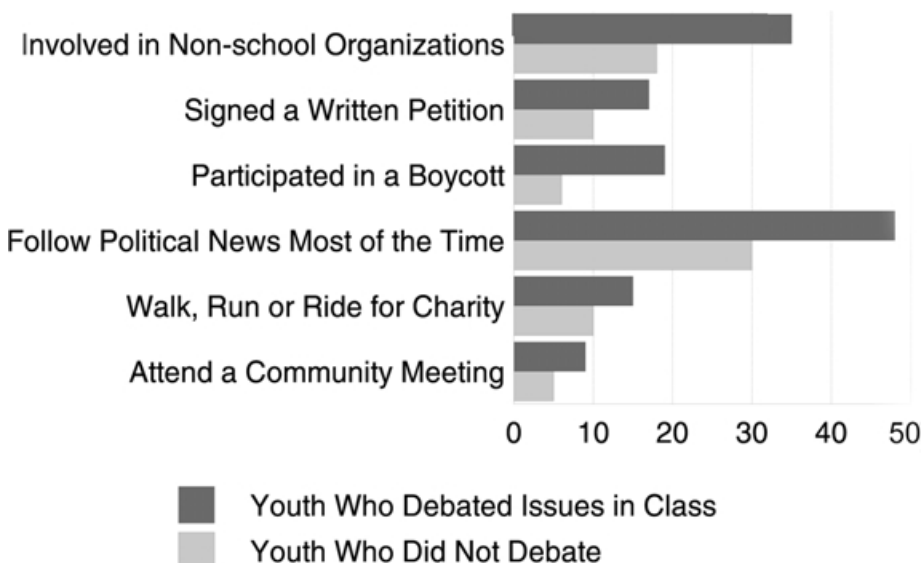
without such dialogue. Similarly, more than one-third (35%) of those who often heard political talk while growing up are regular volunteers, compared to just 13% of those raised in homes where political talk never occurred. By talking about politics, families teach their children that it is important to pay attention to the world around them—and to take the next step of doing something.

Parents and guardians, even siblings, provide critical role models for civic behavior as well. Young people who were raised in homes where someone volunteered (43% of all youth) are highly involved themselves—joining groups and associations, volunteering, wearing buttons, or displaying bumper stickers at rates higher than those who did not grow up with such examples. Youth with engaged role models are also more attentive to news of politics and government and more likely to participate in boycotts or buycotts. Both of these influences continue to be significant even when demographic and other factors are taken into account.

### Lessons from the Schools: Practice, Practice, Practice

Family influences are augmented by lessons learned in high schools and colleges. Schools can provide training grounds for civic involvement, offer opportunities for open discussions, and create avenues for service work—all of which lead to higher levels of youth involvement.

**Figure 1**  
**Civic Skills in High School Pay Off**



Source: Knowledge Networks survey of 1,166 youth aged 15–25

Civic instruction is commonplace at the high school level, though it varies from current events requirements in classes to mandated service work in the community. Nearly three-quarters (70%) of current high school students took a course that required them to pay attention to government, politics, or national issues in one of the two previous school years. A slight plurality report that such courses had a positive impact on them. Half (48%) said that their interest in politics and national issues increased as a result, while 41% report that these courses had no impact. Only 8% said that their interest decreased. Among college students, fewer have taken such courses (40%), although almost as many (47%) said that their interest increased as a result.

However, simply requiring attention to politics and government is not enough to foster greater involvement among high school students. Instead, it is when students report that teachers encourage open discussions about these matters that their scores on scales of civic behavior climb. This finding holds up even when other important influences are taken into account.

Open discussions are a regular part of the classroom experience for about half of today's high school students. Fully 49% report that teachers often encourage the class to discuss political and social issues in which people have different opinions; another 27% say that teachers sometimes do so. Slightly over half (54%) say that teachers encourage them to make up their own mind about issues; 31% say they sometimes do. Very few students say that open discussions and independent thinking are never encouraged (4% and 1%, respectively). Among college students, about half (47%) say that teachers often promote open exchanges and fully 70% say they are encouraged to make up their own mind about issues.

Teachers can have a greater impact on engagement when they require students to develop specific civic skills, but not all students are being taught such skills. Eight-in-ten high school students have given a speech or oral report, but only half (51%) have taken part in a debate or discussion in which they had to persuade someone about something and just 38% have written a letter to someone they do not know.

Students who have been taught these skills, especially letter writing and debating, are much more likely than those lacking such education to be involved in a range of participatory acts inside and outside the school environment, even when other factors are taken into

account. Again, the link between these skills and participation is much stronger than is the more generic course requirement to follow politics and national affairs.

### **Schools and Volunteering: The Impact of Carrots and Sticks**

Many of today's students volunteer in part because high schools and colleges have facilitated such efforts and provided reinforcing classroom support. Three-quarters (75%) of high school students say that their school arranges or offers service activities or volunteer work; 65% of college students say so. A much smaller number of students say that volunteer work is required for graduation—21% of high school students and 7% of college students.

Student involvement rises when schools facilitate volunteer work, and participation steps up again when schools mandate it. Some 45% of students at high schools that arrange service work volunteered, compared to 33% of students who attend schools that don't provide such assistance. Fully 59% of students whose high schools required volunteer work actually volunteered last year, compared to 37% of students without such requirements.<sup>6</sup> Among college students, 38% whose schools arrange work volunteer, compared to 13% among those whose schools do not make volunteer arrangements. (Too few colleges require such work to allow for an analysis of this effect.)

Again, classroom discussions can play a critical role in youth involvement. Student volunteers who are encouraged to talk about their volunteer work in class are much more likely to stick with it. Fully 63% of high school students and 58% of college students who volunteered within the last year had an opportunity to talk about their service work in the classroom. This group is twice as likely to volunteer regularly as those who don't get the chance to talk about their experiences (64% vs. 30%, respectively). They are also much more likely than those without such discussions to work with others on a community problem (47% vs. 32%), to participate in a run, walk, or bike ride for charity (27% vs. 15%), or to influence someone's vote (50% vs. 34%). These findings remain valid even when a host of other factors are taken into consideration.

In college, the breadth of opportunity for involvement increases but the requirements decrease. And for many students who attend college away from

home, the ties to community that help support civic involvement by high school students are no longer present. The result is that despite their age and experience, college students today are less likely to volunteer, and no more likely to pay attention to news about politics and government than high school students.

### **School Organizational Affiliations: Political Training Grounds**

Civic lessons are not limited to classroom settings. Many high school students are gaining significant training through their participation in extra-curricular activities, especially when they are involved with political groups. Students who participate in political groups in high school continue to be disproportionately civically and politically active after graduation.

Two-thirds of current high school students (66%) participate in some kind of organized group or club, and most are involved in more than one group. The participation rates for student government or service clubs are much lower (12% and 9%, respectively).

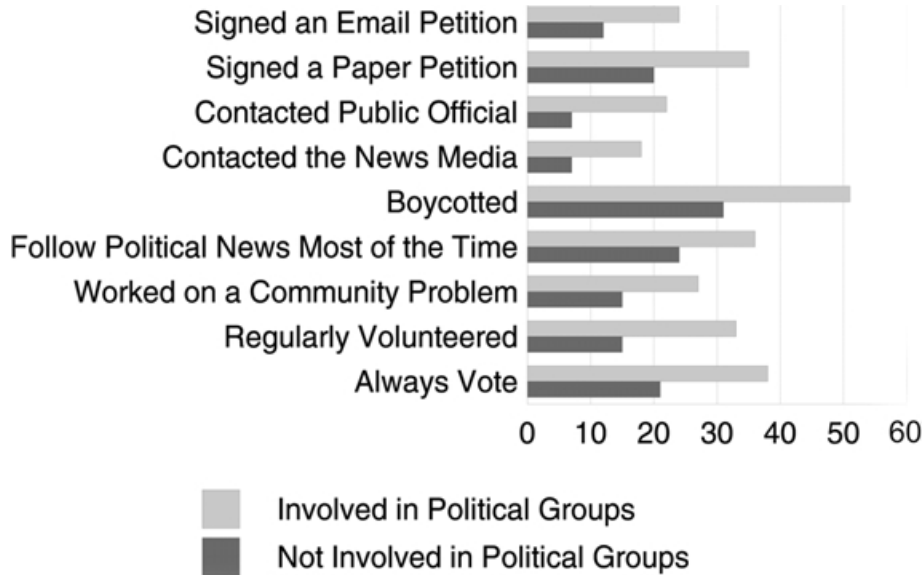
When high school students are active outside of school, it's usually with sports or religious groups. Fully 44% say they participate in organized sports; 37% are active with religious youth groups. Participation in these two arenas far outstrips activity in other entities such as Model United Nations (1%), political clubs (1%), and 4-H (3%).

The content of student groups matters. Simply being involved in high school organizations does not lead to greater activity after graduation, but involvement in political groups does. Among high school graduates, those who participated in political organizations while in school vote more frequently (38% vs. 21%), are more attentive to news (36% vs. 24%), and volunteer regularly at twice the rate (33% vs. 15%) as those without experience in these organizations. They are also more likely to give voice to their concerns through boycotting, signing petitions, or contacting public officials or the news media.

Notably, the different rates of engagement between those who participated in political organizations in high school and those who did not holds up even when other factors associated with participation (parental influences, income, and advanced education) are taken into account.

College student involvement in associations is less common than it is in high

**Figure 2**  
**Political Involvement in High School Pays Off**



Source: Author's telephone survey of 1,001 youth aged 15–25

school, and more diffuse when it does occur. Fully 60% of college students are not involved with *any* campus groups, and no organization draws even a large plurality of college students. The largest draws are sports and Greek organizations (13% and 11%, respectively), although almost as many report being involved with subject oriented groups (9%) and honor societies (8%). Ethnic or religious groups pull in another 6%. Student governments garner 6%, while political organizations attract only 3%.

### Other Intermediaries: Creating Connections

Young adults are not affected solely by the push and pull of families and schools. Outside groups and institutions also play key roles in boosting their engagement. A simple but direct invitation to participate can make a critical difference for those ages 15- to-25-years.

Current volunteers were asked how they first began working with their volunteer groups, that is if they made the first contact, if the group contacted them, or if someone else put them together. Most of those in the DotNet cohort were active through outside initiatives—either “someone else put us together” (20%) or they were recruited by the group (39%).

The tendency of youth to need a facilitator suggests that an obvious mechanism for increasing involvement among this age cohort would be targeted mobi-

lization. Yet youth today receive fewer invitations to participate (especially in the political world) than their elders. Just 12% of DotNets have been personally contacted by a campaign, party, or group to work for or contribute to a candidate. Almost twice as many (23%) GenXers have received such requests and about one third of the older cohorts have.

Across a range of activities, DotNets who were targeted by outside mobilizers were much more active than were those who did not receive such attention. Among those aged 15- to-25-years who were contacted by a political group in the past year, almost one-third (31%) volunteer regularly for a non-electoral group, 42% worked to raise money for charity, and 36% worked to solve a community problem. For DotNets who were not contacted, the figures are 21%, 26% and 19%, respectively. Indeed, mobilized DotNets outstrip those who haven't been contacted across almost every participatory measure—and these differences persist even when other factors (such as income, education, or family influences) are taken into consideration. The exception is fundraising, but this may simply be an indication that, as young adults, they have less money than older cohorts.<sup>7</sup>

Other research has shown that churches and synagogues provide effective training for civic engagement (Verba et al. 1995). This survey reinforces that finding for young adults. DotNets who attend religious services

regularly are much more active in both the civic and electoral realm than are those who do not take part in any religious activities. Presumably, by attending religious services youth are coming into contact with individuals who provide volunteer opportunities, encourage them to get involved in their communities, or offer them political buttons and bumper stickers to display.

### The Engaged Worldview: Efficacious and Dutiful

Activists are also driven from within. Individuals who feel they can make a difference in their communities or believe they have a responsibility to get involved are more active than are those who don't hold these views. Those who say that citizenship carries responsibilities vote more frequently, are more apt to work on a problem in their community, and pay closer attention to news of politics and government than do those who say that simply being a good person fulfills the obligations of citizenship. Similarly, those who believe they can make a difference are voting, working on problems in their community, and following news about politics and government at rates that surpass those who do not feel as empowered.

These links are especially true for older individuals, suggesting that these attitudes harden over the course of one's life and may serve to either reinforce or erode an ethic of engagement. Thus, families, schools, and other groups wishing to influence young adults long after they have left the home or graduated from school can lay the groundwork for later engagement by encouraging positive attitudes early on.

### Conclusion

Youth engagement won't be boosted in a single stroke. There is no simple solution to apply, no magic tonic to administer, no engagement gene to alter. The pathways to participation are too wide and too varied, and they are influenced by too many factors—families, schools, clubs, groups, churches, even friends. But if this means civic involvement is unlikely to be spurred by a lone strike, it also suggests that there are multiple prods to encourage participation.

Families can be important role models. Engaged parents tend to raise engaged children. For some young people, schools can open the doors to civic and political life as well as teach specific civic skills. Individual teachers can play vital roles

by encouraging students to talk openly and to debate ideas. Religious institutions, policy organizations and other

groups can also invite young adults to participate in specific acts such as protesting, political campaigning and com-

munity service. Together, these individuals and institutions can hold sway over the public participation of today's youth.

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## Notes

\*This research was sponsored by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, which bears no responsibility for the analysis presented here. The authors would also like to thank Beth Donovan, who edited portions of this essay.

1. One recent study, which does address this question, has documented a positive relationship between open classroom discussions and higher levels of civic knowledge as a teenager and greater propensity to vote as adults (Torney-Purta 2001).

2. Knowledge Networks is a California-based survey research company founded at Stanford University. It maintains a panel of over 100,000 households in the U.S. Individuals in the households are surveyed using Web-TV via an Inter-

net connection, which is provided free of charge by Knowledge Networks.

3. In designing this survey we faced the difficult tradeoff between asking all adults about their high school experiences and thus having data for the entire adult population and the problem of subjecting individuals who graduated from high school decades ago to provide us with potentially invalid information about experiences. We opted for a smaller data set and more validity over a larger data set with less validity.

4. We refer to this age cohort as a "generation," but we realize that it is too soon to determine if they are a true generation—shaped by events and cultural norms and distinct from preceding cohorts.

5. Full results of the study are available via the web site of the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement at [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).

6. A school requirement for volunteer work might not specify the year in which the work had to be done; thus it is not illogical that some students faced with this requirement did not actually volunteer this year.

7. These mobilization measures suffer from endogeneity. That is, people who are active are more likely to remember being contacted and people who are already active are more likely to be contacted in the first place. Nevertheless, the effect does hold up when other influences are taken into consideration.

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