Millennials Talk Politics: A Study of College Student Political Engagement

Abby Kiesa
Alexander P. Orlowski
Peter Levine
Deborah Both
Emily Hoban Kirby
Mark Hugo Lopez
Karlo Barrios Marcelo
This report is published in collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people’s engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship.

CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and other foundations.

The Charles F. Kettering Foundation (www.kettering.org) is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics and education.

Acknowledgements

Charles F. Kettering Foundation
Dr. Derek Barker
Dr. John Dedrick
Libby Kingsseed
Dr. Robert Kingston
Ilenea Marin
Anne Thomason

Tessa Garcia, Institute for Sustained Dialogue
Ariane Hoy, Corellia & Bertram F. Bonner Foundation
Dr. Nicholas V. Longo, Miami University (OH)
Ross Meyer, New York University
Stephanie Raili, Miami University (OH)

Student Advisory Group

Koshin Ahmed, University of Minnesota Twin Cities
Amy Baker, Providence College
Nicholas Basdekis, University of Massachusetts Boston
Joseph Boninwell, Providence College
Kaley Cole, Oklahoma State University
Miles Findley, Oklahoma State University
Christina Hisel, University of California Berkeley
Amanda Hoffman, Kansas State University
Leonard D. Jackson, Jr., Tougaloo College
Anna Kanass, Bowdoin College
Matthew King, Kansas State University

Elizabeth Lundeen, Wake Forest University
Kourtney McDowell, Tougaloo College
Kim Mckeecher, University of Minnesota Twin Cities
Roksana Mun, Dickinson College
Agnes Nansubuga, University of Massachusetts Boston
Alexander P. Orlowski, University of Dayton
Christian Osmeña, University of California Berkeley
Lisa Peterson, Bowdoin College
Chris Wagner, University of Notre Dame
Jerry Walker, Central State University
Brian Young, Denison University

“Students who also played a role in organizing focus groups on their campus.

Campus Teams

Bowdoin College
Emily Baird
Joy Lee
Sarah Seames

Kansas State University
Amanda Hoffman
Matthew King
Dr. David E. Procter
Mary Hale Tolar

Princeton University
Andrew Frederick
Dr. Beth Kiyoko Jamieson
Caitlin Sullivan

Providence College
Amy Baker
Dr. Rick Battistoni
Dr. Joe Cammarano

Tougaloo College
Dr. Steve Rozman

University of California Berkeley
Carrie Donovan
Dr. Andrew Furco
Christina Hisel
Christian Osmeña

University of Dayton
Dr. Christopher Duncan
Richard Ferguson
Erin Fuller
Alexander P. Orlowski
Suzette Pico

University of Massachusetts Boston
Dr. Joan Arches
Agnes Nansubuga
Jain Ruvidich-Higgins
Dr. John Saltmarsh

University of Minnesota Twin Cities
Dennis Donovan
Elaine Eschenbacher
Addi K. Jadin
Derek Johnson
D’Ann Urbaniak Lesch

University of New Mexico
Dr. Kiran Katira
Sebastian Pais-Iriart
Elizabeth Silva

Wake Forest University
Dr. John J. Dinan
Dr. Katy Harriger
Elizabeth Lundeen
## Executive Summary

Main Findings

1. Today’s College Students are More Engaged than Generation X Was

2. Millennials are Involved Locally with Others but are Ambivalent about Formal Politics

3. Millennials Dislike Spin and Polarized Debates and Seek Authentic Opportunities for Discussing Public Issues

4. Differences Among the Millennials: Colleges and Universities are Providing Very Unequal Levels of Opportunity for Civic Participation and Learning

**Recommendations**

All Students Need to have Opportunities for Civic and Political Participation, and Students Need Opportunities and Space for Deliberation on Public Issues

**Future Research Areas**

Non-College Youth

Opportunities on Other Campuses

Achieving a Civic Mission in Resource-Limited Contexts

Filtering the Media

**Appendix**

Methodology

Demographics

Survey Toplines
Why Investigate College Students’ Civic Engagement?

Young people are the future of our democracy, and a large body of research shows that their experiences in adolescence and early adulthood permanently shape their attitudes, values, and habits in relation to politics and civil society.

Over the past two decades many organizations and networks have formed in support of the “civic mission of higher education” in various forms and around many disciplines. This report examines whether the civic mission is prominent and effective today.

By no means are all young Americans college students. In fact, about half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 are not enrolled in college and have not completed college. That half of the population should be studied more intensively and offered more structured opportunities for civic engagement. It is equally important to look at the civic and political engagement of those 18-to-25-year-olds who are enrolled in institutions of higher education. Their education often gives them access to leadership positions in major institutions in the United States and around the world.

The Project

In 1993, The Charles F. Kettering Foundation published College Students Talk Politics, a national study conducted by the Harwood Group and based on focus groups on ten American campuses. The study found, among other things, that students considered politics “irrelevant” to their lives and saw little purpose in ever actively participating in the political system.

We wanted to know whether and how college students’ civic engagement had changed after almost 15 years of tumultuous political events and work by colleges and universities. Therefore, in 2006 and 2007, we interviewed college students, the majority of whom belong to the Millennial Generation (born after 1985). We designed our methodology to produce a comparable sample to the 1993 Harwood Group report. We spoke with undergraduates in focus groups on 12 four-year college and university campuses across the United States. In total, 386 student participants were involved in 47 focus groups (three to five groups on each campus). We also asked the students to complete a brief written survey at the conclusion of each focus group.

Findings

1. Today’s College Students are More Engaged than Generation X Was

Our focus groups revealed a generation of college students who have a great deal of experience with volunteering (mostly face-to-face and local) and who believe in their obligation to work together with others on social issues. They are neither cynical nor highly individualistic.

2. Millennials are Involved Locally with Others but are Ambivalent about Formal Politics

The Millennials appear to be much more comfortable and experienced with direct service than with politics, yet their feelings toward government, politicians, and the media are complex. They do not want to write off politics, despite their many criticisms; instead, they seek ways to engage politically.

3. Millennials Dislike Spin and Polarized Debates and Seek Authentic Opportunities for Discussing Public Issues

Students perceive politics, as it currently exists, as a polarized debate with no options for compromise or nuance. They do not like the competitive and confrontational atmosphere created by the parties and many do not seem to want their beliefs and identity limited by party affiliation. Many have not developed opinions quite yet, and this may factor into their aversion to political parties.

The focus groups uncovered a distinct sense that students find it hard to be informed about pub-
Students are seeking opportunities for discussion that are authentic, not competitive or partisan. They appreciate discussions in which no one is trying to sell them on anything. Often, students spontaneously cite the atmosphere created in the focus groups as very desirable and attractive. We speculate that they like the informal, peer-to-peer discussion in a non-hostile and non-divisive atmosphere.

4. Differences Among the Millennials: Colleges and Universities are Providing Very Unequal Levels of Opportunity for Civic Participation and Learning

Although we identified characteristics that today’s college students share, equally compelling are the differences in civic opportunities they experience. Students on different campuses and types of campuses have had very different kinds of opportunities to develop civic skills, interests, and confidence.

In some groups, mostly on campuses that have explicit civic missions, students have had many opportunities for engagement. They have frequently been recruited for political and civic action. They have high efficacy, and some are quite knowledgeable. In other groups, students can report little recruitment and few political opportunities; they have little knowledge and very low efficacy; and many express fear, outraged, or bewilderment about politics and government.

Recommendations

All Students Need to have Opportunities for Civic and Political Participation, and Students Need Opportunities and Space for Deliberation on Public Issues

Students are seeking opportunities for discussion that are authentic, not competitive or partisan. They appreciate discussions in which no one is trying to sell them on anything. Often, students spontaneously cite the atmosphere created in the focus groups as very desirable and attractive. We speculate that they like the informal, peer-to-peer discussion in a non-hostile and non-divisive atmosphere.

Given the disparities in civic opportunities that this study has uncovered, it seems especially important to provide opportunities for discussion and reflection on campuses whose student bodies are less engaged.

Representing Students

We made a deliberate effort to involve students at each stage of this project—one is a co-author of this report (see Acknowledgements on the inside back cover for the list of students who contributed). Students helped us to understand their peers’ lived experiences, decide which questions to ask, how to recruit students for focus groups, and how to talk about civic and political participation.

We have tried to represent students’ words and the intentions behind those words as accurately as possible. This report is full of quotes, most of which are unedited in an effort to capture the spirit of the focus group conversations. We cannot, however, reproduce the uniqueness of each two-hour conversation.