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**The Center for Information & Research
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Dissonant Discourse Turning Off College Students to Formal Politics

Study Provides Clues to Mobilizing Increasingly Civic-Minded Youth Millennial Generation More Engaged than Generation X

Most Extensive Look at College Students' Attitudes on Politics, Civic Engagement and Voting in 15 Years

Washington – College students in the United States are hungry for political conversation that is authentic, involves diverse views and is free of manipulation and “spin,” according to a new report released today by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) and The Charles F. Kettering Foundation. The report provides important clues to political candidates running for all offices about how to mobilize young voters, who by all accounts will make up a quarter of the voting population in the 2008 elections.

Today’s students—part of the Millennial Generation born between 1985 and 2004—are more engaged in their communities and feel responsible to become civically involved. They recognize the importance of being educated and involved citizens, but discard much of the information available to them because of its polarizing and partisan nature. They are turned off by intensely combative political debate, the report says.

“We know students want information—but from sources they trust,” said CIRCLE Director Peter Levine. “We also know the generation of emerging adults is more engaged than Generation X and more likely to appreciate an authentic opportunity for reasonable discourse. Our research shows there are opportunities for candidates to connect with and motivate them to vote.”

Nearly 400 students convened in 47 focus groups on 12 four-year college campuses across the country to discuss their civic and political attitudes and experiences. Researchers also collected written surveys from the students and drew on a national telephone survey to compile “Millennials Talk Politics.” The report follows up on a 1993 study published by the Kettering Foundation that found students considered politics “irrelevant” to their lives and they saw little purpose in actively participating in politics.

Current students do not share those views—they are eager to go into their communities and put their education to work.

“You sit in a classroom and you read your dusty books with your dusty professors about dusty things, and then you don’t learn anything about what you can do with it,” said one Minnesota student. “Then you go into the community and all of a sudden you’re like, wow, this is who I am and this is where my skills can go.”

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Page 2/ Study Provides Clues to Mobilizing Increasingly Civic-Minded Youth

The 1993 survey found Generation X students to be individualistic and alienated; they strongly identified with self and found little use for political involvement. Researchers speculate that the Millennial students' shift in attitude is engendered by the changing political environment—closely contested national elections, terrorist attacks, ideological polarization—and this generation's vast exposure to “service learning” opportunities and requirements in secondary and post-secondary education.

Today's students are proud of their civic activism. However, the confrontational arena that currently defines American politics is distasteful to the majority of those surveyed, with few willing to embrace a party label. Still, they are not tuning out politics altogether.

More college students are voting today as voter turnout rose substantially in 2004 and again in 2006, but most students in the study view voting more as a necessary, “symbolic gesture” than as a means for creating change. A University of California Berkeley student said, “I think voting is the least you can do in terms of showing that you're political.”

Researchers say the problem is not a lack of information, but an overload of news and opinion students find untrustworthy because of its partisan bent. A Princeton student summarized college students' general frustrations: “Politics to me...does not have an idealistic connotation, whereas rallying and activism and going for a cause has more of that idealistic undertone, while politics is marred by bad deals.”

From the Kansas State student who testified in a local school district hearing to the student at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, whose friend got a bill introduced in the state legislature, many of those surveyed had stories of action related to public policy. The political system as a whole, though, remains inaccessible; most students agreed in the written survey that politics is a way for the powerful to keep power for themselves.

The study found that colleges and universities are providing very unequal levels of opportunity for learning and participation. Students at some institutions complained that it was difficult to cross their campuses without being recruited for a political cause, and there were many other opportunities to participate, discuss, and learn about issues. On other campuses, few students reported they had opportunities for civic engagement.

The report's chief recommendation is that the problems of information overload, confusion over formal politics and uncertainty over ways to achieve social change could be mitigated if students have more opportunities to discuss current issues and experiences to stimulate meaningful discussions in various “open” and “authentic” settings—those not dominated by institutions.

Students participating in the survey were from the following campuses: Bowdoin College, Kansas State University, Princeton University, Providence College, Tougaloo College in Jackson, Miss., University of California, Berkeley, University of Dayton, University of Maryland, University of Massachusetts, Boston, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, University of New Mexico and Wake Forest University.

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The research is based on 47 focus groups with a total of 386 student participants, conducted by CIRCLE on 12 four-year college and university campuses. These two-hour focus groups were conducted on campuses between October 2006 and July 2007 (pilot focus groups were conducted at the University of Maryland in June 2006). Students also completed a brief survey and received compensation for participation.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of young Americans. Since 2001, CIRCLE has conducted, collected, and funded research on the civic and political participation of young Americans. CIRCLE is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy and is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Carnegie Corporation of New York 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.