

LAKE SNELL PERRY & ASSOCIATES  
THE TARRANCE GROUP, INC.

present

# SHORT-TERM IMPACTS, LONG-TERM OPPORTUNITIES

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## THE POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG ADULTS IN AMERICA

Results and Strategic Recommendations  
from a National Survey of  
1,500 young adults ages 15-25  
conducted January 6-17, 2002

Analysis and Report for  
The Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning &  
Engagement (CIRCLE)  
and

The Center for Democracy & Citizenship  
and The Partnership for Trust in Government  
at the Council for Excellence in Government

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# METHODOLOGY

Lake Snell Perry & Associates, with The Tarrance Group, designed and administered this survey, which was conducted by telephone using professional interviewers from January 6 through January 17, 2002. The survey reached a total of 1,500 young people between the ages 15 and 25 nationwide, including 1,200 randomly distributed interviews, and oversamples of 150 African American and 150 Hispanic young people.

Telephone numbers for the survey were drawn from a random digit dial sample (RDD). The data were weighted by age and race to reflect actual distribution of the national population of young people. The oversamples were weighted into the base sample to reflect the racial distribution of the national population of young people.

In interpreting survey results, all sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error; that is, the results of a survey may differ from those that would be obtained if the entire population were interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends upon both the total number of respondents in the survey and the percentage distribution of responses to a particular question. For example, in Question 13, which all respondents answered, 53% said that generally speaking, you can't be too careful in dealing with people; we can therefore be 95% confident that the true percentage will fall within 2.8% of this percentage, or between 55.8% and 50.2%. The table below represents the estimated sampling error for different percentage distributions of responses. The margin of sampling error for subgroups is greater than the margin of error for the entire sample.

Sampling Error by Percentage  
(at 95 in 100 confidence level)

SAMPLE SIZE	PERCENTAGES NEAR								
	<u>10</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>90</u>
1500	1.5	2.0	2.3	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.3	2.0	1.5
<b>1200</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>1.7</b>
1000	1.9	2.5	2.8	3.0	3.1	3.0	2.8	2.5	1.9
900	2.0	2.6	3.0	3.2	3.3	3.2	3.0	2.6	2.0
800	2.1	2.8	3.2	3.4	3.5	3.4	3.2	2.8	2.1
700	2.2	3.0	3.4	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.4	3.0	2.2
600	2.4	3.2	3.7	3.9	4.0	3.9	3.7	3.2	2.4
500	2.6	3.5	4.0	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.0	3.5	2.6
400	2.9	3.9	4.5	4.8	4.9	4.8	4.5	3.9	2.9
300	3.4	4.5	5.2	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.2	4.5	3.4
200	4.2	5.5	6.4	6.8	6.9	6.8	6.4	5.5	4.2
100	5.9	7.8	9.0	9.6	9.8	9.6	9.0	7.8	5.9

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Just as President John F. Kennedy's assassination is a critical moment for the baby boomer generation, the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> are likely to be a defining moment for today's young adults. On the heels of September 11<sup>th</sup> and another momentous national event – the election controversy of 2000 – social scientists, political practitioners, and others who have long been concerned with the civic and political engagement of young adults could not help but wonder how recent events would affect the political attitudes and beliefs of young adults. The results of this survey provide some of the answers about the impact of current events, as well as highlight trends and issues in young adults' attitudes towards political and community engagement, and offer recommendations for candidates who want to engage young adults.

Overall, the terrorist attacks and the war appear to have influenced the way young adults *feel* – about the government, their communities, and – in theory – about their own civic and political involvement. Young adults are now more trusting of government and institutions like their older counterparts since 9/11. We also see important upsurges in reported interest in community and issue organization involvement. However, these tragic recent events have not yet impacted young adults' community or political *behavior*. Relative to two, four, and six years ago, levels of voter registration and volunteering are down, and young adults show no change in their likelihood to think of voting as important. Yet, with young adults evaluating their views of government and politics, there is hope that more positive feelings and political actors' and institutions' subsequent actions may cause further shifts in the future.

This data, like so many studies before, point to the significance of parents' political behaviors in shaping the attitudes and engagement level of young adults, the critical role played by feelings of efficacy, and the importance of demographic factors like education, age, partisanship and church attendance in influencing levels of political and volunteer activity.

As with the cohorts that have immediately preceded them, young adults today perceive distance between government, politics, politicians and themselves. The word "politics" conjures up – first – process-oriented words like "government," "laws," "voting," "elections," and "campaigns;" second, the word "politics" triggers mentions of key players like the "President," and "candidates and politicians;" third, "politics" reminds young adults of things like "corruption, lying, cheating, and lack of trust." At a time of overall record trust, only slim majorities think political institutions and actors address the needs and concerns of young adults. And, while nearly all young adults say they think their votes count as much as anyone else's, they also believe that candidates would rather talk to older and wealthier people than to them. While nearly all believe that candidates want their vote, fewer believe that candidates *ask* for their vote. This view of candidates and politicians comes perhaps from years of neglect. Young adults have the same concerns as older voters and want to be treated with respect.

As the Center for Democracy and Citizenship's 2000 Candidate Toolkit first suggested, young adults want candidates to ask them to vote, to treat them as important audiences worthy of addressing, and to discuss serious issues of concern to all adults. Like most voters, young adults say they are more influenced by candidates' substance than their style – candidates who stand up to powerful interests and do what is right, who have issue positions worth supporting, whose record and experience merit reward, and whose character is admirable. Indeed, throughout the survey, we found a serious

mindedness among young adults. There are opportunities for both parties here and though the Republican youth are more politically engaged, this cohort even at this time has equal numbers of Republicans (28 percent) and Democrats (30 percent).

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## KEY FINDINGS ABOUT THE AFTERMATH OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

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Far more than other recent public events, young adults describe September 11<sup>th</sup> and the war on terrorism as having a significant positive impact on their attitudes about political participation and government. Clearly, September 11<sup>th</sup> has created unprecedented opportunities for engaging a new generation of activists and public servants who – even before the attacks in New York and Washington – have a strong sense that community involvement is an important core value.

While significant minorities of young adults express at least moderate interest in choosing a public service career, young adults do not appear to have become more engaged in their communities or to have changed their attitudes about the importance of voting. Thus, it remains to be seen whether those who seek to engage youth and youth themselves will realize long-term opportunities presented by 9/11 and the ensuing war, although this data suggests that in some trends we are headed in the right direction.

- **September 11<sup>th</sup> and the war fuel positive feelings towards political participation and government for significant majorities of young adults.** Seventy percent of young adults say the war on terrorism makes them at least somewhat more likely to participate in politics and voting, including a full third (34%) who say they are now *much* more likely to participate. Similarly, youth say the war has made them more favorable towards government (72% at least somewhat more favorable, including 33% much more favorable). Fewer than ten percent say the war has made them less likely to participate, and just 12% say they feel less favorable towards the government as a result of the war.

When asked specifically about the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, two-thirds of young adults (67%) say they are at least somewhat more likely to participate in politics and voting (29% much more likely to participate) because of the attacks, and an equal share (69%) say they feel more favorable towards government (30% much more favorable). Just sixteen percent say they feel less favorable towards government as a result of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Other recent political events – the election controversy of 2000, the third party presidential candidacies of John McCain and Ralph Nader, Bill Clinton’s Presidency, protests over globalization – and the recession have either been more polarizing in their impact or have had very little impact at all.

- **As is true among adults in national polling data, young adults show remarkable levels of trust in government in the wake of the terrorist attacks.** Six in ten young adults (62%) say they trust the government to do what it right for the country, while just over a third (37%) say they have little or no trust in government. However, this trust has yet to result in increased attachment to or involvement in political and civic activities.

- **Sizable shares of young adults say September 11<sup>th</sup> has made them more likely to consider pursuing careers in community and issue-focused organizations.** More than half of all young adults (56%) say they would be at least somewhat likely to consider working for a community service organization, and just under half (49%) say they would be at least somewhat likely to work for an organization that focuses on a particular issue; a minority say they are extremely likely or very likely to consider these careers (30% and 25%, respectively). Interest in these occupations has increased in the wake of the terrorist attacks – a plurality of young adults (44%) say they are *more likely* to work for a community service organization as a result of 9/11, and a significant minority say they are *more likely* to work for an issue-focused organization (36%).
  - **However, fewer young adults are willing to serve actively in either the civilian or military service roles that have been more directly involved in fighting terrorism, though slightly more are interested in law enforcement and firefighting careers.** Young adults report a slight increase in their willingness to choose law enforcement or firefighting as careers (+9 net more likely to choose), but there is an overall decline in willingness to join the military (-3 net less likely to choose). In all, under half of young adults say they would be even somewhat likely to consider careers in law enforcement (43% at least somewhat likely, including 22% very/extremely likely) or the military (36% at least somewhat likely, including 20% very/extremely likely).
  - **The visibility of government leaders and politicians throughout the war has not resulted in youth desiring to run for office themselves.** Few young adults (24%) express even moderate interest in running for political office (just 12% say they are extremely or very likely to run for office), and the terrorist attacks had no impact for half of young adults and a dampening effect on that impulse for the rest (-11 net less likely to run). Similarly, careers in local or federal government are of moderate interest to just over four in ten young adults, and 9/11 had no impact on most young adults' desire to serve in government.
  
- **Despite their stated intention to participate more vigorously in politics and community life, young adults' civic and political involvement has not increased in recent months.** Voter registration and volunteerism rates are lower in this survey than in previous national surveys.
  - **Despite the fact that three-quarters of young adults continue to insist that neither registering to vote nor voting itself is difficult, claims of voter registration have declined slightly.** In this study, 66% of 18 to 24 year olds claim to be registered to vote. In 1998 and 2000, surveys conducted for the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) and The White House Project Education Fund, respectively, both found that 70% of 18 to 24 year olds said they were registered voters. As in a 1996 study for the John and Teresa Heinz Family Foundation, very few young adults say registering (16%) or voting (15%) is difficult. Rather, young adults abstain from registering and voting for other reasons discussed throughout this report.
  - **Reported episodic community volunteerism is down.** Compared with an April 2000 survey conducted for The White House Project Education Fund, the percentage of young adults who volunteer at least once a month has stayed about

the same (27% now, 30% in 2000), but episodic volunteering – people who volunteer anywhere from “less often than once a year, but sometimes” to every two or three months – has declined by 7 points (31% now, 38% in 2000). The share who “never” volunteer is up 10 points (37% now, 27% in 2000), and now exceeds the share who volunteer at least once a month.

- **Reports of specific kinds of non-political community involvement – donating to a charity, volunteering with a community organization like a homeless shelter, joining a non-political club or organization – have become less common since the NASS study in 1998.**<sup>1</sup> Comparing the habits of today’s 18 to 24 year olds to those of November 1998, self-reported donations of money, clothes and food have dropped 14 points (72% now, 86% in 1998); reports of joining a club or organization that does not deal with politics or government have declined 11 points (46% now, 57% in 1998); volunteering with a homeless shelter or other community organization decreased by 10 points (40% now, 50% in 1998).

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#### **KEY FINDINGS ON VOTING AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACTS AND OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY PARENTAL POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION**

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As measured by self-reported voter registration rates, two-thirds of young adults are loosely involved in the political process. However, actual engagement levels are much lower. The impact parents have on their child’s political and civic attitudes and behaviors cannot be overstated. Parents who discuss politics with their children, take their children to vote, and make a habit of voting in all or nearly all elections raise children who volunteer, vote, feel they can make a difference in their communities, and see politicians and institutions as more open to being influenced by the public. Conversely, parents whose own political engagement levels are lower raise children who do less, care less, and feel less connected to institutions and leaders. Parental behavior also fosters higher political knowledge levels and greater political information gathering, which are also related to voting and volunteering.

- **Overall, young adults have ambivalent views of the political realm and their place in it.** On each of the core attitudinal variables that influence political behavior, young adults as a group have divided views:
  - On the importance of voting, 50% say voting is extremely or very important, while 49% say it is a little important or not at all important to them.
  - About a third each see voting as a choice (34%) or a right (31%). A fifth declare voting a responsibility (20%) and even fewer go further to say it is a duty (9%).
  - A bare majority (53%) say the government and elections address the needs and concerns of young adults, and a slightly smaller share (48%) say political leaders pay at least some attention to the concerns of young people like themselves. On the

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<sup>1</sup> Other studies suggest this may also be due to some seasonal variation in participation and this study was conducted in the winter, while NASS was conducted in summer and fall.

one hand, these numbers may be higher than many expected. On the other hand, this reflects significant cynicism among young adults when overall cynicism has significantly declined.

- In terms of community-oriented efficacy, most young adults doubt the impact they can have – just 46% say they can make at least some difference in working to solve the problems they see in their community, while 52% say they can make just a little difference, almost no difference, or no difference at all.
- **The single most important factor associated with young adults’ sense of efficacy and views of politics and government is their parents. Whether or not parents discuss politics with their kids, take their kids with them to vote, and vote regularly is highly correlated with whether their kids engage in political life, even after controlling for all other demographics.**
- **Just half of all young adults (50%) say they discussed politics, government, or current events at least sometimes with their parents when they were growing up.** Moreover, slightly more young adults say they “never” discussed politics with their parents (19%), and some say they “often” discussed politics (15%). Among 18 to 24 year olds, the reported frequency of political discussions has declined since the NASS study in 1998 – at that time, 57% of young adults reported discussing politics with their parents at least sometimes, including 22% who said they “often” discussed politics, government, and current events with their parents.
- **Two-thirds of young adults (64%) report that their parents vote in every election or most elections.** Just 37% overall recall going with a parent to vote.
  - Compared to young adults overall, larger shares of college-educated and college-bound youth, full-time students, Republican and conservative youth, Democratic women, devout churchgoers, Born Again Christian youth, and Northeasterners report having parents who discussed politics or took them to vote.
- **Parents’ behavior affects the range of their children’s political views and behaviors. In multivariate models that control for demographic differences, among the three parental behaviors, discussing politics is the strongest predictor of a range of young adults’ attitudes and behaviors.**<sup>2</sup> Looking just at comparisons of young adults with parents who discussed politics and young adults who were raised with little or no political discussion on attitudinal and behavioral variables:
  - **Efficacy:** 56% of young adults whose parents discussed politics with them believe they can make a difference in solving community problems, compared to just 37% of young adults whose parents did not discuss politics.
  - **Politicians’ responsiveness to youth:** More than half of young adults (57%) who grew up with political discussion at home believe political leaders pay at least some attention to the concerns of young adults (+16 net pay attention), while those whose

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<sup>2</sup> The demographics included as controls were party identification, age, education, gender, race and native status, region, demographic area (urban, suburban, rural), work status, student status, church attendance, and marriage and parental status.

parents didn't discuss politics at home have the opposite perspective (39% pay attention, -20 net do not pay attention).

- **Trust in government:** Seven in ten young adults (71%) who grew up with political discussion trust the government (+43 net trust), compared to just 53% of those who grew up without political discussions at home (+8 net trust).
  - **Importance of voting:** Twice as many young adults who grew up with political discussion in their households believe voting is important (68% of those who grew up with discussion, compared to 33% of those who did not grow up with discussion).
  - **Conception of voting:** A plurality of those who grew up with political discussion at home see voting as a right (38%) and a quarter see it as a responsibility (24%), while a plurality of those who grew up without political discussion see voting as a choice (43%).
  - **Volunteering:** 33% of young adults who grew up with political discussion at home volunteer at least once a month, compared to 22% of young adults who grew up without political discussion. Correspondingly, just 29% of those whose parents discussed politics say they never volunteer, compared to nearly half (46%) of young adults raised by non-discussing parents.
  - **Voter registration:** Three-quarters (75%) of young adults who grew up with political discussion at home are registered, compared to 57% of those who grew up without political discussion.
- **In order for parents' voting habits to have the greatest effect on their children's attitudes, parents must vote consistently in all or most elections.** In terms of beliefs about voting, personal efficacy, and trust in government, young adults whose parents voted only in important elections (14% of all young adults) resemble those whose parents voted rarely or never (17% of all young adults) more than they resemble kids whose parents voted in all or most elections (64% of all young adults).
  - **Parents who talk with their kids about politics, take their kids to vote, and vote in all or most elections also tend to raise kids with higher levels of political knowledge and more attentiveness to political news in the media.** Higher knowledge levels and more frequent news consumption are also correlated with higher levels of political engagement.

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#### KEY FINDINGS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFICACY AND TRUST IN VOTING & YOUTH'S PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP TO THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Trust in government and a sense of efficacy – that one's actions can make a difference – are two core beliefs that drive political engagement. Trust in government is at a modern high point among both young and old Americans since September 11<sup>th</sup>, and this presents an opportunity to increase political participation. However, while trust is up, feelings of efficacy in helping to solve problems have remained relatively unchanged; noticeably, in the same time period, voter registration and community

engagement rates have also declined slightly. The critical question for politicians and others interested in boosting youth participation is how to increase levels of efficacy among young adults who do not currently feel they can have an impact.

- **Recent events have resulted in relatively high levels of trust in government.** As mentioned elsewhere, 62% of young adults currently “trust government to do what is right,” and this is a factor in voting. A smaller proportion of young adults believe most people can be trusted (41%). While trust in people is not a statistical predictor in attitudes about voting, it is related to the general mindset of youth and their willingness to engage with others.
- **Despite an increase in faith in the government among all adults and youth, young adults continue to be divided about the impact they can have in solving community problems.** As noted elsewhere in this report, fewer than half of young adults (46%) say they believe they can make at least some difference in working to solve problems in their community; just 11% say definitively that they can make a great deal of difference. A third (31%) feel they can make a little difference, and 21% say they can make almost no difference, or no difference at all.
- **Efficacy and engagement are mutually reinforcing – young adults who have already been mobilized into politics and community life have higher levels of efficacy, and those with higher levels of efficacy show greater levels of involvement in civic and political life.** Registered voters, people who see voting as important, people who trust government, and people who volunteer generally believe they can make a difference in their community, while people who have not been involved in community and political life do not tend to express feelings of efficacy. Additionally, young adults who pay attention to political news have relatively high levels of efficacy.
- **Life experience, educational experience, and a sense of group identification bolster feelings of efficacy.** Relative to their peers, older, more educated, more partisan, and more religious young adults feel efficacious, as do young adults whose parents taught them and demonstrated political engagement.
  - Relatively few 15 to 17 year olds have feelings of efficacy – just 41% feel they can make a difference (-17 net make no difference) – and these figures are even lower for high school students who do not expect to attend college (35% can make a difference, -27 net make no difference). Comparatively, 55% of 18 to 25 year olds in college or with some college education (+12 net make a difference) and 62% of college graduates (+25 net make a difference) have high levels of efficacy. Regression models show age, student status, and church attendance have significant and strong effects on feelings of efficacy.
  - **Young adults of color feel less efficacious than whites.** While white youth are split almost evenly in their views on whether they can make a difference in their community (-3 net not make difference), African Americans (-16 net not make difference) and Hispanics (-19 net not make difference) are more pessimistic; men of color are particularly skeptical of the difference they can make. Since 2000,

whites have become more efficacious, while feelings of efficacy among African Americans have declined.<sup>3</sup>

- **Just as they are divided on the impact they can have in solving community problems, young adults are ambivalent about the real impact they can have on politics.** Half (50%) agree it would be difficult for someone like them to have a real impact in politics and government, while 45% disagree. Intense opinions on this question are polarized – 19% strongly agree that it would be difficult to have an impact on politics, while 17% strongly disagree.
- **Young adults’ ambivalence about the impact they can have may be fueled, in part, by uncertainty about the goals and responsiveness of candidates, politics, and government.** Young adults have particularly mixed feelings about whether and how well these institutions and actors address young people’s needs and concerns, and about how important young voters are to candidates, relative to other audiences candidates have to court.
- **Overall, young adults see politics and elections more as the business of elites, than as avenues for democratic participation.** More young adults strongly agree that politics and elections are about politicians competing to get elected (49%) and about debating laws and issues (41%) than strongly agree that politics and elections are the way that average people get their say in government (32%) or a democratic community’s efforts to solve its problems (30%). Young adults with high levels of efficacy see these two types of goals as having a more equal place in politics and elections, while those with low levels of efficacy believe politics and elections are dominated by politicians competing with one another to get elected.
- **Young adults believe their votes count, but that they may not be a priority audience for candidates.** Young adults say they believe their votes count as much as anyone else’s (85% agree, including 53% strongly agree), but also believe candidates would rather talk to older and wealthier people than to younger people (71% agree, including 42% strongly agree). Additionally, two-thirds of young adults believe that candidates ask for their vote (68% agree, including 28% strongly agree), but are unsure whether candidates take young voters seriously (47% agree, 50% disagree). Young adults with high levels of efficacy are more positive about politicians’ motives and the role of young adults in politics.
- **Young adults do not see themselves and their generation as particularly significant in the political process, and they feel that candidates do not always reach out to their communities.** Young adults split on whether they see people like them voting by a three-point margin (44% agree that they do not see young people voting, 47% disagree), but agree by a six-point margin that candidates never come to their community (50% agree, 44% disagree). Younger and less educated voters are more likely than their older and more educated peers to think people like them do not vote and to think that candidates ignore their communities. In contrast, among young adults with high levels of efficacy, just a third

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<sup>3</sup> 49% of whites believe they can make a great deal or some difference, compared to 43% in 2000. However, only 42 percent of African Americans believe they can make at least some difference, while 53% believed they could in 2000 (note, small sample size among African Americans in the 2000 data).

agree that they don't see people like themselves voting (34% agree) and that politicians don't come to their community (37% agree).

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## KEY FINDINGS ON VOLUNTEERISM

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This is a generation that believes in the importance of community volunteer involvement, but is volunteering at slightly lower rates than the cohort of 18 to 24 year olds of a few years ago. Most volunteer because they were asked by a person or by a religious institution, because it provides personal gratification, or because they believe it makes a difference. Volunteer activities of choice include working with local community-based organizations and making donations of clothing, food, or money. Volunteer involvement in political activities is much lower than in activities that provide direct service or focus on the community more broadly. As has been seen in other studies, young adults see community activism and political activism as two separate items. Cluster analysis reveals that, while 30% of young adults can be classified as engaged in both politics and community life, another quarter (24%) only tend to volunteer; the rest (46%) are largely disengaged from both facets of public life.

- **Across the board, young adults see local community involvement as the most important focus for volunteer activities.** Twice as many young adults see volunteering in local community activities as important as see participation in a national organization as important (49% versus 23%). Four times as many see volunteering in the local community as important than see getting involved in politics and government as important (12%). Even majorities of those who say voting is personally important to them and who are registered to vote say local community volunteer activities are the most important kind of activity in which a citizen can engage.
- **Donations to community or church organizations and involvement with a community group or club top the list of volunteer activities in which young adults have participated in the last couple of years. As is true for older adults, activities that do not involve politics are more popular than activities that do.** 72% of young adults say they have donated money, clothes, or food to a community or church organization in the past couple of years. This is the only activity that more than half of young adults have done, but – among 18 to 24 year olds – donations have dropped since 1998, when 86% of young adults said they had donated. Second tier activities of choice are: joining a club or organization that does not deal with government or politics (47%, down among 18 to 24 year olds by 11 points since 1998), and volunteering for a homeless shelter or other community organization (38%, down among 18 to 24 year olds by 10 points since 1998).
  - **Like their older adult peers, a minority of young adults participate in politically-oriented volunteer activities.** Fewer than a fifth have participated in an online discussion or visited a politically oriented website (18% overall, 29% among full-time students, who are more likely to have reliable Internet access). About a tenth have participated in a political march or demonstration (12%), volunteered in a political campaign (13%), joined a political club (13%), or worked for a political party (8%); these numbers are statistically unchanged from 1998, although club membership is up slightly among 18 to 24 year olds (14% now, 9% in 1998).

- **About a fifth of young adults have held or sought leadership positions. Full-time students are more likely to explore leadership opportunities than non-students.** 22% of all young adults, including 36% of full-time students, have held leadership positions in groups, clubs, or organizations *other than* student government; part-time students are actually less likely than young adults overall to have held a leadership position (16%). Similarly, 20% of all young adults and 33% of all full-time students have *run for* an *elected* leadership position, including student government. Projecting to their future, however, only 12% of all young adults (23% of full-time students) say they are very likely to run for political office.
- **College-educated women are dramatically more engaged in community leadership than their male counterparts and may represent a cohort of community leaders.** For example, 73% of college women say they have joined an organization that is not political and 53% say they have volunteered in the community compared to 47% and 35% respectively among college men. Unfortunately, we do not see a number surge in terms of joining political organizations, running for office, or engaging in political activity.
- **Looking to the future, young adults are most likely to see themselves engaging in the same kinds of activities in which they already tend to participate.** Nearly all say it is at least somewhat likely that they will donate money, clothes, or food to a community or church organization in the next few years (85%, including 24% extremely likely, 34% very likely); half say they are at least somewhat likely to join a non-political club or organization (55%, including 9% extremely and 20% very likely); and six out of ten say they are likely to volunteer for a homeless shelter or other community group (59%, including 11% extremely likely and 21% very likely).
  - **Noticeably, strong pluralities to majorities of young adults are certain that they will not engage in political activism.** A majority (57%) say they are not at all likely to run for an elected leadership position (32% in 1998); 53% say they are not at all likely to work for a political party; 50% say they are not at all likely to join a political club or organization; 46% say they are not at all likely to volunteer in a political campaign; 44% say they are not at all likely to participate in a political march or demonstration.
- **Just under half of all young adults (47%) and 48% of 18 to 24 year olds volunteer in their communities at least once a year.** This is lower than the 54% of 18 to 24 year olds who said they volunteered at least once a year in a survey conducted in 2000.
  - **Currently, just over a quarter of young adults claim to volunteer with a local community group or organization at least once a month (27%).** 11% volunteer at least once a week. These dedicated volunteers tend to be current high school and college students, students who are in school full-time and do not work, college-educated or college-bound women, first generation Americans, devout churchgoers, Born Again Christian youth, and young adults who identify as either weak or strong Republicans or strong Democrats.
  - **Another fifth of young adults (20%) volunteer every couple of months or at least once a year.** An additional 10% do not volunteer once a year, but do

volunteer from time to time. These tend to be 18 to 20 year olds, women in their early 20s, part-time students and young adults who work two jobs.

- **A plurality of young adults (38%) say they *never* participate in volunteer activities with a community group or organization.** Those who never volunteer tend to be men (particularly high school age men, and 21 to 25 year olds), Hispanic and white men, high school students who are not bound for college, 18 to 25 year olds who did not attend college, and young adults who do not attend religious services.
- **Parental socialization affects both *whether* young adults volunteer, and how *often*.** Majorities of young adults whose parents discussed politics (57%) and took them to vote (60%) volunteer at least once a year, including a third of each group (33% and 35%, respectively) who volunteer at least once a month. Just 25%-29% of young adults with engaged parents (whether measured by taking their children to vote or talking with their children about politics) never volunteer. Conversely, nearly half of those whose parents did not engage them in politics (46%) never volunteer.
  - **Only a bare majority of today's young parents are showing their children that volunteering is important.** 51% of young adults with children volunteer at least sometimes. Episodic monthly volunteering is popular with this group – 30% volunteer every month – 10% volunteer every week. This may reflect the relatively young age and low socio-economic status of these young parents, but still gives further evidence of a shift in trends from previous generations where young parents were heavily involved in regular volunteer activities.
- **Contrary to the conventional wisdom that young adults volunteer for selfish reasons or because they are required to by their school, most young adults (30%) say they volunteer because they were asked – by a church (17%) or a person (13%) – because it makes them feel good (24%), or because it makes a difference (21%).** Just 8% volunteer as a resume-builder (including 11% of full-time students) and just 6% volunteer as part of a school requirement (including just 9% of full-time students). Additionally, parental volunteer activity is only responsible for motivating 4% of young adults to volunteer.
  - **Subgroups of young adults who volunteer at higher than average rates tend to be motivated by different factors.** Younger teen volunteers (24%), especially non-college-bound teens (30%), tend to be driven most by their *churches* asking them to volunteer, while 18 to 25 year old high school graduates and those with some college tend to be driven about equally by personal gratification and the desire to make a difference (23%-27% for each response). College graduates are motivated disproportionately by personal gratification (33%). Devout churchgoers and Born Again Christian youth volunteer mainly because their church asked them (27% and 23%, respectively).

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## KEY FINDINGS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT

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Young adults who are attached to institutions that provide political, civic, and ideological cues participate more than their peers in community activities, and have distinctly more positive attitudes about voting and political participation. In particular, young adults who attend church on a weekly basis, Republican young adults, and conservative young adults are notable for their civic and political engagement. Additionally, Republican youth are motivated by the presidency of George W. Bush and the aftermath of the Florida controversy. This is one of the only periods in recent times where supporters of the in-party are more mobilized than supporters of the out-party. However, given the unique circumstances of war, terrorism, and President Bush's popularity, this may not be surprising. Church-going and Republican youth have more politically engaged parents, that is, parents who tended to vote more in all or nearly all elections, were more likely than other parents to discuss politics with their children, and were more likely to take their children with them to vote.

- **Young adults who identify with one of the two major party labels have more positive and well-defined views about politics than independents who seem to be more disengaged than ideologically middle-of-the-road.**
  - **Young adults who associate themselves with a partisan or ideological label on either the Left or the Right are more likely than others to be registered voters.** Registration rates among Democrats and Republicans (78% and 76%, respectively) are significantly higher than among Independents (58%). There is a similar, though less strong, relationship among ideologues – liberals and conservatives (72% and 74%, respectively) tend to be registered to vote in higher shares than moderates (63%). Conservative ideologues have many of the same attributes as Republicans.
  - **Volunteerism is more common among Republicans than among Democrats, but in both parties, strong partisans are dedicated volunteers.** A third of all Republicans volunteer at least once a month, and 29% of Democrats. Relative to their partisan peers, independents volunteer in lower proportions (25% volunteer at least once a month). Strong partisans in both the Democratic and Republican party have higher *weekly* volunteerism rates than their weak partisan peers – 21% of strong Democrats and 15% of strong Republicans volunteer once a week or more.
- **Republican and conservative youth attach more value to voting.** Nearly two-thirds of Republicans (64%) say it is important to them to vote, including a sizable share (29%) who say voting is extremely important (+29 net important). Strong Republicans are even more steadfast in this ethic – 74% say voting is important, including 37% who say it is very important (+50 net important).
- **Republicans and conservatives express a greater sense of efficacy than Democrats.** Republicans overall believe they can make a difference in helping to solve problems they see by an 8-point margin (+13 among strong Republicans). Democrats express slightly lower levels of efficacy, but strong Democrats feel more efficaciously than Democrats overall (+5 net can make a difference among all Democrats, +9 among strong Democrats). Similarly, more conservatives than liberals express efficacy (+10 net make a difference versus +2 net

make a difference), but both defined ideological groups have greater feelings of efficacy than moderates (-9 net not make a difference).

- **The government in power likely affects this generation's feelings about government. Young Republicans and conservatives are currently mobilized by George W. Bush's Presidency, and trust the government to do what's right. They also believe the system is addressing the needs and concerns of young people.** Seven in ten Republicans and conservatives (70%-73%) trust the government to do what's right for the country (+47 and +41 net trust, respectively). 63% of Republicans and 59 percent of conservatives say the Bush Presidency makes them more likely to participate in government and politics (including a quarter of each group who say they are much more likely to participate). Additionally, 69% of Republicans and 66% of conservatives say Bush makes them feel more favorable towards government (including a third of each group who say they are much more likely to participate). Both of these groups also agree by large margins that government and politics do a good job addressing young people's needs (Republicans: +31, conservatives: +29 net agree). Democrats and liberals have more mixed views (Democrats: +10, liberals: +4 net agree). As we have seen, Democrats and liberals also have lower levels of political engagement though controlling for factors like religion and parental involvement removes the separate effects of party and ideology.
- **Political discussion habits in Republican and Democratic families were more equal than were voting experiences with parents. Parents of Republicans and conservatives are among the most regular voters and make a uniquely strong effort to involve their kids in politics.** Most Republicans (60%) and a majority of Democrats (54%) grew up with parents who discussed politics with them, while only a minority of independents (45%) grew up with political discussion at home. Once again, similar patterns exist among ideological groups – 59% of conservatives had political discussions with their parents as did 55% of liberals; discussion among moderates was slightly less common (48%). While nearly half of all parents of Republicans and conservatives voted in every election and took their children to the polls with them, parents of Democrats and liberals voting behavior was closer to the behavior of the parents of youth overall (27% of Democrats and 29 % of liberals say their parents voted in every election; 38% of Democrats and 40% of liberals say their parents took them to vote). Voting behavior and propensity to take kids to the polls was below average among the parents of independents and moderates (24% of independents and 27% of moderates say their parents voted in every election; 33% of independents and 36% of moderates say their parents took them to vote).
- **Young adults who attend church at least once a week (30% of all young adults) see community engagement as a core value.** Nearly half (48%) volunteer at least once a month, including nearly a quarter (23%) who volunteer at least once a week. Both regular churchgoers and Born Agains are more likely to believe they can make a difference in solving problems in their community (55% can make at least some difference, +11 net difference among churchgoers; 50% can make at least some difference, +2 net difference among Born Agains).
- **Young churchgoers also see political participation as meaningful.** Nearly two-thirds of devout young adults (64%) say voting is extremely or very important (+30 net important), compared to 54% of occasional churchgoers (+8 net important), and 37% of non-churchgoers (-23 net not important). Similarly, 62% of Born Again youth see voting as important (+26 net important).

- **Young churchgoers have a more positive view of government and the political system’s performance in addressing the concerns of young people.** Seventy percent of devout and occasional churchgoers and Born Again youth trust government to do what is right for the country (+45 among devout churchgoers, +43 among Born Agains, and +41 among occasional churchgoers net trust government); there is a .29 correlation between church-going and trust in government. Far more than their peers, these young adults agree that elections and government address the needs and concerns of young people (+30 among Born Agains, +24 among devout churchgoers, and +22 among occasional churchgoers net agree, +8 among all youth).
- **Devout churchgoers and Born Again young adults appear to have been exposed to greater civic and political engagement from their parents than young adults overall.** A full 50% of devout churchgoers went with their parents to vote, as did 44% of Born Again youth. Majorities discussed politics with their parents (56% of devout churchgoers, 55% of occasional churchgoers, and 55% of Born Again youth). More than a third (37%) of both devout churchgoers and Born Again youth say their parents voted in every election, compared to 29% of young adults overall.

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**KEY FINDINGS ON OPPORTUNITIES FOR CANDIDATES: WHAT ARE YOUTH LOOKING FOR?**

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While parents, current events, and a young person’s environment can dramatically affect young adults’ political and civic attitudes and behaviors, candidates and political leaders also play a critical role in mobilizing young adults to vote. As the Center for Democracy and Citizenship learned in putting together its Candidate Toolkit in 2000, young adults want to interact and be treated seriously by candidates. This study has quantified young adults’ candidate preferences and suggests tremendous opportunities for candidates who impress youth with substance over style, and who make an effort to talk directly to young adults about issues affecting all Americans.

- **Young adults are unsure whether political institutions and actors – government, politics and elections, candidates – pay attention to youth and address their concerns.** Young adults agree by only a slim 8-point margin that politics and elections and government address their concerns (53% agree, 44% disagree). They are even more ambivalent about how much attention political leaders give to issues that concern young people (-2 net little/no attention).

Young adults who do not feel political institutions and leaders address their concerns are far less likely to be registered to vote (56% are registered), think voting is important (-21 net not important), or trust government (-17 net distrust). They are also more likely to be disengaged from their community – 46% never volunteer.

- **Like most older voters, young adults say a candidate’s issue stands are the most important factor in their voting decisions.** Given a list of candidate attributes to consider, two-thirds (65%) say issue stands are the first or second most important consideration in choosing a candidate (44% say it is the most important consideration). Record and experience follow second (18% most important, 40% first or second most important), and the character of the candidate ranks close behind (16% most important,

36% first or second most important). Personality is seen as the most important factor by just 11% of young adults.

Party affiliation is an issue for just a small share of young adults, including even those who self-identify as strong partisans (15% overall name party as one of the top two considerations; 30% of strong Democrats and 28% of strong Republicans name party as one of their top two considerations). Strong partisans from both parties prioritize issue positions, record and experience, and character above party affiliation; and weak partisans and independents are more concerned with each of the other four factors, including the candidate's personality, than with the candidate's party affiliation.

- **As young adults said in focus groups in 2000 in preparation for compiling the Center for Democracy and Citizenship's Candidate Toolkit, young adults want candidates who show strength in their convictions, seek out opportunities to address young people, try to relate their own experiences to those young adults have, and have a demonstrated commitment to the community and a demonstrated record in politics.** Young adults feel warmest towards a candidate who can "face powerful interests and stand up for what he believes is right," (mean score of 83 on a 1-100 scale, with 32% rating "100"). In a second cluster of desirable candidate traits are: "a candidate who calls for a debate at a local high school or college to take issues to the students and to young people," (mean: 79, 23% rate 100); "a candidate who speaks to issues of particular concern to young people, like affordable college," (mean: 78, 21% rate 100); "a candidate who is experienced in politics and can get things done," (mean: 78, 19% rate 100); "a candidate who says he understands first hand the importance of affordable college education because he needed grants and loans to go to college himself," (mean: 75, 21% rate 100); and "a candidate who has been active volunteering in his community," (mean: 75, 18% rate 100).
- **Bipartisanship, hiring young people as senior campaign staff, and providing information on issue positions comprise a second tier of traits that make young adults favorable to candidates overall, but do not generate intensely positive opinions.** Young adults give mean scores of between 69 and 73 to the following types of candidates, but only between 14% and 17% rate these candidate traits as a "100:" "a candidate who has worked with people from the opposing party to reach consensus on issues," (mean: 73, 17% rate 100); "a candidate who regularly publishes a report to voters on how he has voted on the issues," (mean: 72, 15% rate 100); "a candidate who has young people holding some major positions in his campaign," (mean 72, 14% rate 100); "a candidate who has a website with detailed information about his positions on issues," (mean: 70, 17% rate 100); "a candidate who admits he does not have all the answers," (mean: 70, 15% rate as 100); and "a candidate who has a written plan on the major issues facing the voters," (mean: 69, 14% rate 100).
- **Relative to other traits, candidates who accept voter feedback over the Internet, "outsider" candidates, candidates with views on issues that are counter to those of the voter, and a candidate's appearance are less important and appealing to young adults. However, young adults still feel far more favorable than unfavorable to these candidate traits and – in a real campaign setting – these traits may convey something about the character of the candidate that appeals to young adults.** Young adults are less impressed with the following kinds of candidates: "a candidate who has a website which invites you to tell the candidate what you think about the issues," (mean: 67, 14% rate 100, 46% rate 76-100); "a candidate whose positions you may not always agree with but who

explains the reasons for his positions,” (mean: 65, 9% rate 100, 41% rate 76-100); “a candidate who dresses informally or casually,” (mean: 60, 8% rate 100, 33% rate 76-100). Noticeably, the outsider profiles of “a candidate who is relatively new to politics and brings a fresh perspective” (mean: 68, 11% rate 100, 46% rate 76-100) and “a candidate who has been successful in business or a profession,” (mean: 65, 8% rate 100, 40% rate 76-100) are far less appealing than the profile of a candidate who is politically experienced and effective.

- **Political leaders should note that young adults’ top concerns mirror those of Americans overall. This means they need to talk to young adults as they would any other audience – pointing out how the issue is relevant to the particular constituency they are addressing and suggesting how they might address the issue once in office.** Jobs and the economy (17%), terrorism and national security (14%) and crime and violence (12%) comprise the top tier of young adults’ diffuse issue concerns. The cost of college is far lower on the priority list – just 6% of young adults, including 6% of college-bound high school students and 8% of those with some college education. Jobs and the economy are particularly salient concerns to 20-somethings, working young adults, Hispanics (tied with crime and drugs), married couples, young parents, and registered voters.
- **In the current environment, Republican candidates can benefit from heightened mobilization among Republican and conservative youth, as well as the institutional structure offered by religious institutions to reach and engage young adults.** Republican candidates have the opportunity to build upon the enthusiasm George W. Bush’s Presidency has generated among a cohort whose formative years were spent under a controversial Democratic president.
- **Democratic candidates need to beware of the current optimistic and engaged mood of Republican youth, reach out aggressively to mobilize young Democrats, and work to engage young independents.** Democrats have a great deal of work to do to get their young partisans as engaged as youth were during the early part of the Clinton administration and reverse the negative feelings independent youth have about government as a result of the Clinton administration. They also need to overcome the negative feelings generated by the Florida election controversy among Democrats and independents. Democrats must make particular efforts to re-engage liberal youth.

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## KEY FINDINGS ABOUT PUBLIC POLICY SOLUTIONS TO ENGAGEMENT

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As this and other studies demonstrate, young adults with higher knowledge levels, more education, more attachment to institutions, and more extensive parental socialization tend to be more engaged in their communities and in politics. More extensive civic education and community involvement may provide all youth – not just those that come from particular backgrounds – with a strong foundation for future community and political involvement. Young adults in this survey say they would be open to new opportunities to do community service, particularly when they receive something tangible in return; they are most resistant to new initiatives that would require mandatory participation. There are significant differences in attitudes about these new measures by subgroups, depending upon whether the particular subgroup would be directly affected by the new program or requirement. In general, young adults who are already engaged like these proposals more than those who are not engaged.

- **Young adults are most enthusiastic about an expanded Americorps-type program – where every young person would be offered a chance to do a full year of national or community service to earn money towards college or advanced training.** Eight in ten young adults (81%) say they favor this proposal, including nearly half (46%) who strongly favor it (+64 net favor). This proposal is most popular among working students (+72 net favor), college-bound 15-17 year olds (+71), young adults with two jobs (+69), and African American youth (+81). It is popular with all Democrats (+72) as well as with strong Republicans (+81), but it is not as engaging to independents (+59).
- **Youth are more divided over a proposal that would require service in exchange for government student aid, and less positive toward a proposal that would require all high school students to do community service.** Young adults favor service in return for federal financial aid by just a 10-point margin (53% favor), but strong opposition is greater than strong support (27% strongly oppose, 21% strongly favor). Youth are negative overall towards the idea of requiring community service in order to graduate from high school (-12 net oppose); 55% oppose this measure, including 36% who strongly oppose it. This is particularly true among 15 to 17 year olds (-35 net oppose).
- **Given young adults’ opposition to a community service requirement in high school, it is surprising that survey respondents expressed support for “instituting a new draft that gives people the choice between civilian or military service.”** The concept of the draft may not be completely clear to this cohort. 61% say they would favor a draft alternative, including 30% who strongly favor this proposal (+31 net favor).<sup>4</sup>
- **Instituting civics and government course requirements in schools wins high marks overall, but is more popular among those who would not be affected by new course requirements.** Two-thirds (66%) favor requiring civics and government classes in high school, including a third (35%) who strongly favor this proposal (+35 net favor). Similarly, 64% favor requiring civics and government classes in middle school, including 30% who strongly favor this requirement (+31 net favor). Noticeably, however, support for these proposals is lower among those who would be currently or most recently affected by these new requirements – for example, 15 to 17 year olds only favor the high school requirement by a 15-point margin and the middle school requirement by a 7-point margin.

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<sup>4</sup> Given the disparity in responses between this question and the proposal for mandatory community service in high school, it is possible that young adults interpreted this proposal as giving people who get drafted for war an alternative to military service; given the current political environment this interpretation might make sense.

**Snapshot of Politically-Oriented, Volunteer-Oriented, and Disengaged Youth  
(Cluster analysis results)**

	<b>Political/Volunteer Youth (30% of all)</b>	<b>Volunteer, Not Political Youth (24% of all)</b>	<b>Disengaged (46%)</b>
<b>Volunteerism</b>			
% volunteer at least weekly	13%	30%	1%
% volunteer at least monthly	34%	64%	4%
% volunteer at least annually	61%	90%	16%
% never volunteer	22%	3%	66%
<b>Voter registration</b>			
% registered	98%	46%	47%
<b>Parental Engagement</b>			
% went to vote with parents	56%	43%	21%
% discussed politics with parents	87%	51%	25%
% parents vote in every election	41%	33%	20%
<b>Core Attitudes</b>			
%/(net) can make a difference solving problems	62% (+25)	57% (+15)	31% (-37)
%/(net) say voting is important	81% (+63)	59% (+19)	25% (-48)
% trust other people	47%	47%	33%
%/(net) trust government	75% (+50)	74% (+48)	48% (-2)
% strongly agree elections are a way for people to have a voice	50%	42%	23%
% strongly agree elections are about politicians competing to get elected	48%	49%	56%
%/(net) say political leaders pay a lot/some attn. to youth	64% (+30)	55% (+11)	34% (-31)
% strongly agree my vote counts as much as anyone else's	71%	56%	40%
% strongly agree candidates want my vote	56%	50%	32%
<b>Demographics</b>			
% women	47%	59%	45%
18-25: % some college +	63%	51%	41%
15-17: % expect some college +	67%	65%	55%
% ID as partisan (Dem or GOP)	77%	57%	45%
% ID as Dem	38%	28%	25%
% ID as GOP	39%	29%	20%
% ID as independent	18%	29%	32%
% Liberal	39%	27%	31%
% Conservative	32%	28%	15%
% student full-time	33%	35%	17%
% weekly churchgoer	34%	44%	20%