



# 2007 AMERICA'S CIVIC HEALTH INDEX



RENEWED ENGAGEMENT: BUILDING ON AMERICA'S CIVIC CORE



A REPORT BY THE  
NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
ON  
CITIZENSHIP  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
CIRCLE AND SAGUARO SEMINAR



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# INTRODUCTION

Over the last 60 years, the National Conference on Citizenship—a non-profit organization chartered by the U.S. Congress—has worked to encourage a more active, engaged citizenry and to foster a spirit of cooperation in the country. In the last five years, the NCoC has featured at its annual conference historians, social scientists, community activists, and leaders in government, non-profit organizations, and the private sector. We have highlighted innovative programs to strengthen American history and civics education; community, national and public service; and political and civic engagement. We have featured new citizens who have taken their oath and new technologies online that have brought us together offline. We have held up outstanding citizens in public and private life—from U.S. Supreme Court Justices and U.S. Senators to citizen activists changing their worlds in the silence of their communities. We have created a network of more than 250 institutions that shares a common interest in seeing our civic stocks rise. And we have launched a Citizen's Oath, modeled on the Ephebic Oath of Athens, to engage young Americans in efforts to understand the principles that define our freedoms and to encourage service to our nation.

In an effort to get a stronger sense of how the country is performing from a civic standpoint, the National Conference on Citizenship created last year "America's Civic Health Index." Just as the country collects data on the strength of our economy that informs policies to maintain economic health, we wanted to have good data to educate Americans about our civic life and to motivate citizens, leaders and policymakers to strengthen it.

This year, our second year in presenting America's Civic Health Index, the principal findings are based on a comprehensive national survey conducted by Harris Interactive and various government data sources. The survey information is nationally representative of the population as a whole and is complete through 2007. The creation of America's Civic Health Index and report was a cooperative effort of the National Conference of Citizenship, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), and the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America. The NCoC would like to give special thanks to the members of our working group:

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**DAVID SANDAK**, Executive Director, National Conference on Citizenship; and

**THOMAS SANDER**, Executive Director, the Saguaro Seminar, Harvard University.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2006, the National Conference on Citizenship published *Broken Engagement: America's Civic Health Index*, documenting steep declines in Americans' civic participation and engagement over thirty years. Those declines were especially pronounced among working-class Americans and high school dropouts, who are almost completely missing from the civic lives of their communities. The story of *Broken Engagement* reinforced recent books that have found Americans "bowling alone," "amusing themselves to death," "tuning out," "avoiding politics," and favoring "stealth democracy."<sup>1</sup>

Our new survey and data collected by the government suggest that there has been no recovery in 2007. In fact, there is evidence of further decline in some indicators, such as trust in other people and levels of charitable contributions. We also know that some of the few hopeful signs we saw emerge after 9/11 and that continued for a number of years, such as a wave of volunteering particularly among young people, have now fallen back to earlier levels. Our civic stocks are low, which is unusual in a time of war.

A closer look, however, gives us a foundation from which to build. This year's report, based on a representative national survey conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of the National Conference on Citizenship, identifies three important points that complicate the story of decline and may stimulate constructive ideas for how to move forward to improve our civic life:

**36 Million Americans Form Our Civic Core:** Our survey asks individuals about more demanding forms of civic engagement, both online and face-to-face, that have not been measured before in national polls. We find that although most Americans are not deeply involved in civic, community, or political affairs, **there is a group of about 15 percent—roughly 36 million people—who participate in impressive ways and stand out as civic leaders.** They are well informed, attend public meetings, work together on community problems, are leaders in clubs and associations, attend religious services, vote and volunteer. An overlapping group of about 24 percent of the American population uses online technology quite heavily for civic purposes. These active, well-informed citizens are fairly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and political ideology. We want to draw attention to the millions of civic leaders because they deserve recognition and support—and it may be possible to increase their numbers.

**More Americans Want More Opportunities to Serve:** Although persuasive studies have found relatively low levels of civic interest and commitment in the population as a whole, **our survey finds that Americans seek more opportunities to participate. Forty three percent say they would be more involved in their communities if there were more opportunities; 80 percent say it is important for government agencies to give citizens voice; and 53 percent choose as the best way to solve problems a collaboration among citizens, non-profits and government.** We want to draw attention to this demand because it could influence public policy. At all levels, government and communities can do more to encourage participation and to work in partnership with civic groups. This hunger for more civic engagement is an encouraging wellspring that we must tap.

**The Millennials<sup>†</sup> Emerge as a Civic Force:** The youngest generation of Americans, those born after 1975, has arrived. They are a large group: **66 million people were born after 1975 and are now 15 or older. They are voting at higher rates than their predecessors, Generation X.** In some respects, they continue downward trends in civic engagement observed for other generations. For example, **they show by far the least trust in their fellow human beings, a crucial aspect of social capital; and they are the least attentive to the news (even online).** On the other hand, **they have the most positive feelings toward the government, and they are heavily engaged in some aspects of civic life, such as volunteering.** They are also the ones who feel they have the fewest *opportunities* for civic engagement and express the most *demand* for it. We want to draw attention to the Millennials because they are our future and they express an appetite to become more engaged in civic life.

When we examine civic trends over the last 30 years, we find significant declines in many of those indicators of civic life, including continuing declines through 2007. Looking at our civic stocks in more depth, however, we find causes for optimism in the existence of a large group of Americans who do intensive civic work; a significant appetite for more civic participation; and the emergence of a new group of Americans—the Millennials—who display encouraging signs of interest in civic life. In an effort to build upon this progress, and not simply bemoan the continuing declines in many indicators of our civic health, we report our findings to foster a deeper discussion about the attitudes, activities, policies, and dialogues that can help strengthen the ability of more Americans to participate in the civic life of their communities and country.

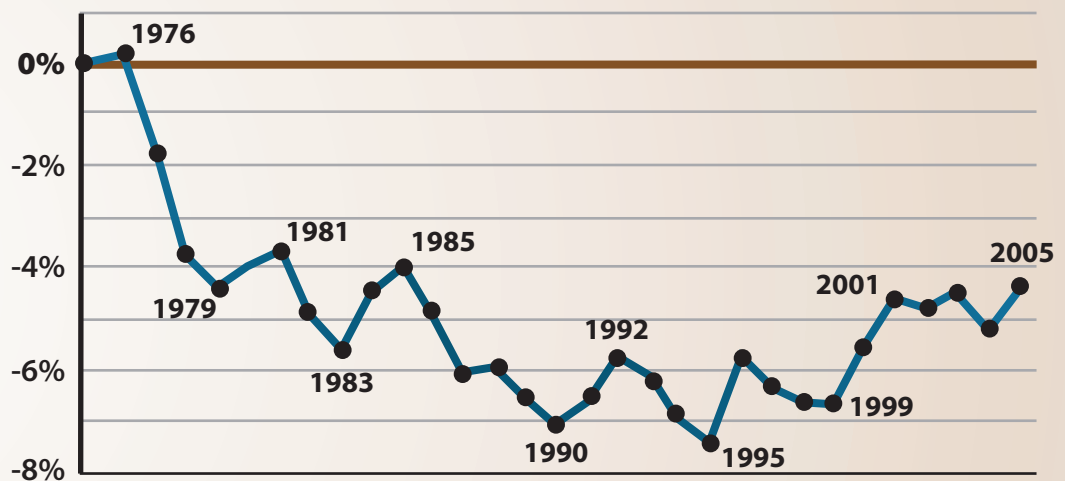
<sup>†</sup> Millennials are citizens born after 1975. See the definition of "Generations" in the glossary.



# MAIN TRENDS IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ARE DOWN

In 2006, our report, *Broken Engagement*, used 40 different indicators of civic involvement to measure how Americans were engaging in community and civic affairs and politics. It included indicators of community participation (such as belonging to groups and attending meetings); trust of other people and major institutions (such as the government and the press); volunteering and charitable contributions; voting and other political activities; political expression (for instance, making speeches and contacting the media); and following and understanding the news and public affairs. By combining all these indicators into a Civic Health Index, we showed that Americans' participation had dropped substantially from the 1970s into the 1990s, and then recovered somewhat in the current decade. Overall, there were alarming trends, but also a few signs of hope, particularly in the voting and volunteering patterns of young people.

FIGURE 1  
CIVIC HEALTH  
INDEX



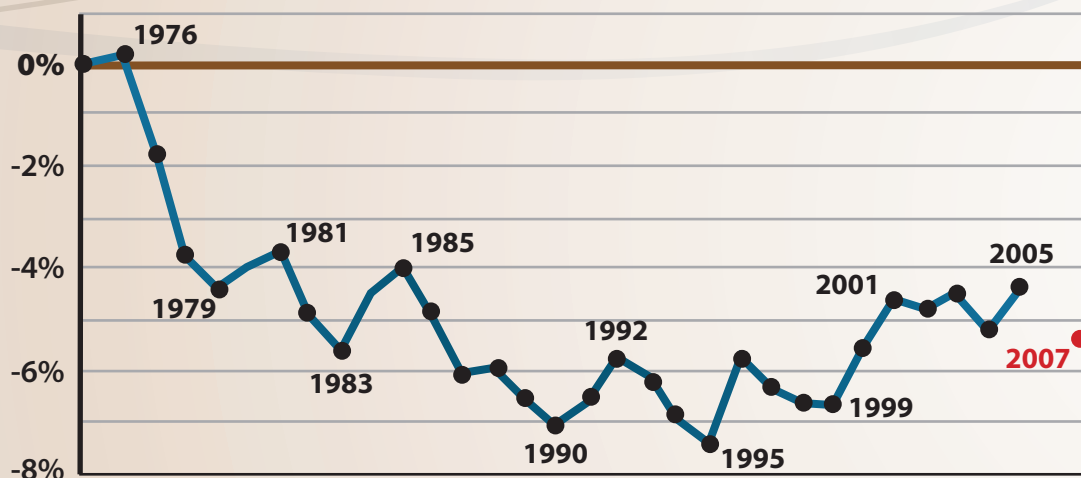
Thirty-three of the components that formed this index were questions asked between 1975 and 2004 by DDB (a market research firm formerly known as DDB Needham), or the American National Election Studies (ANES). DDB has changed its poll, and ANES will not field its next survey until 2008. Therefore, in order to continue monitoring civic health, we repeated these 33 questions in our own survey conducted by Harris Interactive during the summer of 2007. Because the format, methodology, and timing of our Harris survey do not precisely reproduce the DDB and ANES, there is some uncertainty about whether our 2007 data are strictly comparable.

**All available data, however, point to a decline after 2003.**

First, the following graph shows how the Index would look for 2007 if we used the Harris data to continue the DDB and ANES trends.<sup>2</sup> There is a clear decline in 2007.



FIGURE 2  
CIVIC HEALTH INDEX  
(2007 ESTIMATE)



Second, for some indicators, precisely comparable data are available after 2005. Most of these indicators show decline:

- After tracking an encouraging and sustained rise in volunteering after 9/11 that continued through 2004, particularly among young people, the Census Bureau identified a significant drop in volunteering between 2005 and 2006.
- The General Social Survey found that trust in other people fell by three percentage points between 2004 and 2006; monthly church membership fell by four points; and newspaper readership fell by six points.
- Internal Revenue Service data show that families and individuals used less of their disposable income for charitable contributions in 2004-2006 than they did in 1999-2003, which had been a high point. This was the case even though the economy was generally strong from 2004 to 2006.
- Voter turnout rose by about one point in 2006—compared to 2002, which was the previous non-presidential election year—but this small increase disappointed many observers who had expected the hotly contested 2006 election to draw more participation.

In short, most of the forms of engagement measured in the Civic Health Index have fallen in the three decades since the mid-1970s. **The recovery after September 11, 2001, while initially very encouraging, seems to have stalled.** Against that background, we now present some positive findings that may help to show the way forward to broader and deeper civic renewal.

# OUR CIVIC CORE

We believe that most of the forms of engagement measured in the Civic Health Index should be common practices among the people. For example, virtually everyone in a democracy should vote, follow the news, and volunteer at least occasionally. We recognize that a core American value is the right not to do any of these things, but we note the research showing that civic connectedness can improve health and well-being. When we observe that more than half of eligible adults did *not* vote in the 2006 election, that tells us that something is wrong with our political system or our civil society, as does the decline in the whole Index since 1975.

There is another way to think about civic health and civic renewal, however. While the aggregate national trends have declined over the past 30 years, there are some rays of hope found among a civic core of millions of Americans, each of whom express deep commitments to their communities. These people are a vital part of any community and often represent the civic foundation on which further civic participation can be built.

We need some citizens to do particularly demanding civic work in their communities—to learn about public issues and to work together creatively to address them. If we define such work in stringent ways, we will not expect to find most people so engaged. Yet it matters who takes on this serious work. Are they numerous enough to sustain our communities and public institutions? Are they diverse enough to reflect our many perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds? Are they well informed and aware of other points of view? And do they feel they have enough opportunities and support to do their civic work effectively? The rest of this report turns to those questions.

## *"CITIZEN-CENTERED" ENGAGEMENT: DISCUSSING AND ACTING*

Since Alexis de Tocqueville described democracy in America in the 1830s, admirers of our political system have been struck by a particular combination of behavior. Our most active citizens *both* attend public meetings on community issues *and* work with other people directly on public problems. Tocqueville observed, "the most democratic country on the face of the earth is that in which men have, in our time, carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires and have applied this new science to the greatest number of purposes."<sup>3</sup> The "art and science of association," as he called it, required discussion to define issues, inform citizens, help them to understand one another's interests and values, and knit together communities. However, talking was not enough. By actually working on public problems, Americans made their talk consequential, and they learned lessons from experience that they could bring back into their conversations.

According to our Harris survey, fifteen percent of Americans (age 15 and older) say they do both of these things. This is certainly a minority, but it includes roughly 36 million people, which (for comparison) is equivalent to the population of the entire state of California and is a greater than the populations of Canada or the combined populations of 21 U.S. states.

Following the terminology of Cynthia Gibson's white paper for the Case Foundation, we say that this 15 percent of Americans does "citizen-centered" work.<sup>4</sup> Citizens may sometimes choose to influence or collaborate with the government, but when they decide for themselves how to address issues, they are appropriately at the center of politics and civic life. Another term for citizen-centered engagement is "public work."<sup>5</sup>

A more stringent definition would require that people discuss issues, work directly on issues, and talk with other people who hold views *different* from their own. Eleven percent of the population—or 26 million Americans—would meet that more stringent definition. In this section, we use the looser standard (not requiring that the discussions be diverse), but we turn to diversity of perspectives below.

### **A highly engaged group**

Our survey shows that the 36 million people who engage in citizen-centered work are remarkably engaged and attentive:

**They are leaders.** Sixty-three percent of them are officers of clubs, compared to only 28 percent of the rest of the population.

**They know more about politics than other people do.** We asked the whole sample three factual questions about politics that have been pre-tested to measure broad knowledge.<sup>6</sup> The people involved in "citizen-centered" work answered two of the three questions correctly, on average, and one third answered them all correctly. Their score was significantly better than the average for the whole population, who got between one or two correct answers (an average of 1.6) out of three.

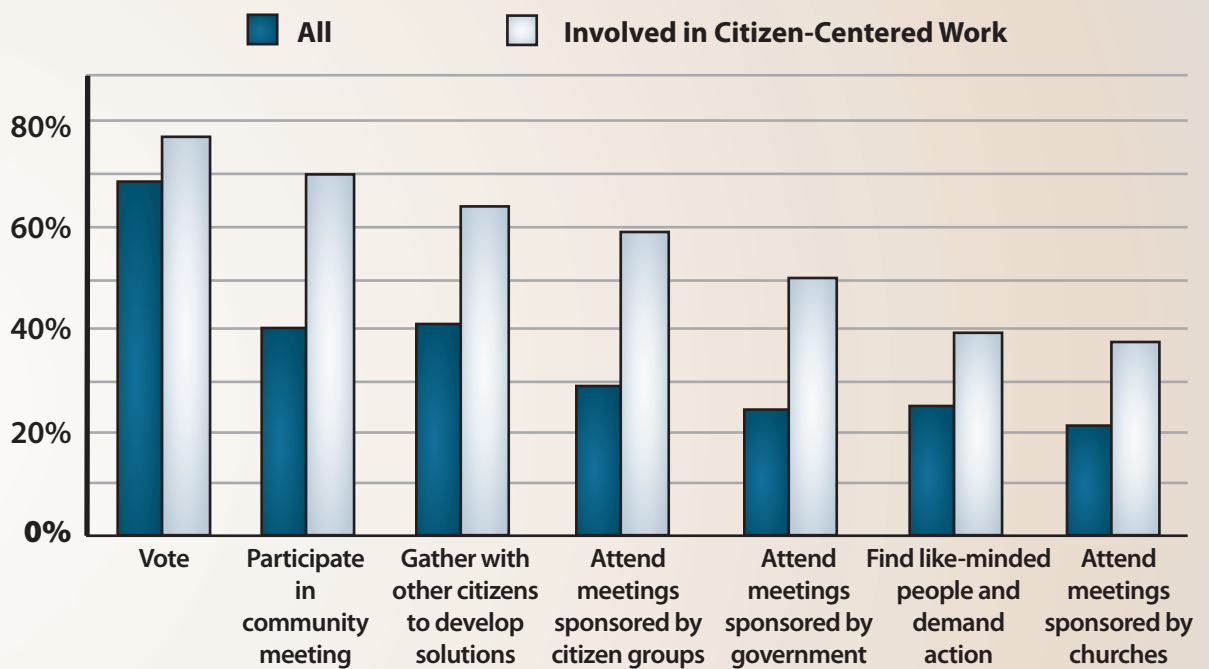
**They are also engaged in electoral politics.** Even though we define the "citizen-centered" group as people who collaborate with peers on local or community issues, more than 70 percent of them say that they "always" vote in local and national elections, and 63 percent say that they participate in campaigns and elections in several different ways (for example, attending rallies or persuading other people to vote). Less than half of the rest of the population claims to vote regularly.

## "CITIZEN-CENTERED" ENGAGEMENT: DISCUSSING AND ACTING (CONT.)

Citizen-centered people have different beliefs about government than other citizens do. They are more eager to be partners with government agencies. Thirty-four percent of them believe that it is "extremely" important for government agencies to give citizens like themselves constructive roles. Only 17 percent of other people agree (half the rate).

The survey asked whether respondents favored seven different strategies for addressing issues and being involved in their communities. Those involved in citizen-centered work were more likely than average Americans to support every one of the seven strategies. However, the gap was biggest when we asked about "attending community meetings sponsored by citizens' groups." About 40 percent of all Americans like to engage in this way, but it attracts 69 percent of the people who do citizen-centered work.

FIGURE 3  
PREFERRED WAYS  
TO ENGAGE



(Respondents could choose as many as they liked.)

More than other people, those who engage in citizen-centered work believe that they have a duty to protest when something in society needs changing. Yet they are somewhat more trusting of the government, suggesting that they believe their voices can effect changes in policy. Finally, they are more likely than other people to say that it is important to serve their country through military service or community service.

## How representative is citizen-centered engagement?

So far, we have shown that the roughly 36 million people involved in "citizen-centered" politics are dedicated, impressively informed and active, and influential. It is therefore important that they reflect all Americans so that the views of diverse groups have a voice.

African Americans and Whites appear to participate at roughly equal rates in various forms of citizen-centered engagement. Unfortunately, our samples of Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans are small enough, and demographically different enough from the national populations of those groups, that we are unable to estimate their rates of "citizen-centered" participation with precision. As noted below, educational attainment correlates strongly with deliberation and public work. Since Latinos have lower *average* rates of college attendance than Whites, we would expect Latinos to be somewhat less represented in meetings and public work.

**African Americans are the most *philosophically committed* to citizen-centered work. They are more likely than Whites to say that they would participate more if they had more opportunities and the most likely to say that a lack of venues for discussion is a serious problem.** When offered a list of ways to address issues and be involved in their communities, they are the most likely to choose participating in community meetings, attending community meetings sponsored by churches (there is a 16-point gap on this question compared to Whites), and to gather with other citizens to identify problems and solutions.

Although liberals have a somewhat higher rate of participation in "citizen-centered" work than moderates and conservatives do, there is ideological diversity among the 36 million Americans. About 43 percent of them are liberals or lean to the liberal side, 35 percent are conservatives or lean to the conservative side, and 17 percent are moderates.

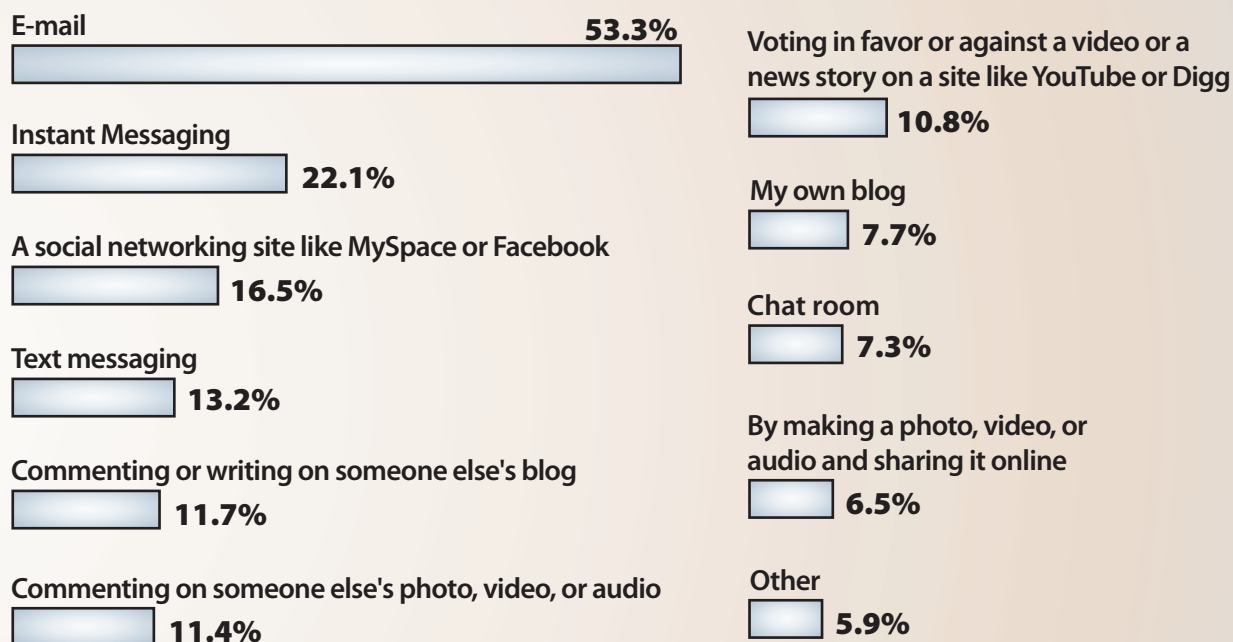
The greatest gap in participation is between the most and least educated. Education can also be seen as a measure of social class. We return to this problem below in the section on "Gaps in Participation." However, in keeping with previous research on political and civic participation in America, we find that religious congregations and labor unions reduce disparities by education. Those who attend church regularly are 8 points more likely to participate in "citizen-centered" work; union members are 9 points more likely to participate. After all, religious congregations and unions provide venues for discussing issues, offer opportunities for working together, and teach relevant skills. Unfortunately, both union membership and attendance at religious congregations have fallen over time.

## NETIZENS: ENGAGING ONLINE

A dramatic recent change in civil society is the opportunity to participate via computers and digital networks. The key question for our purposes is whether new technologies have increased our civic involvement or, in the words of Scott Heiferman, CEO of Meetup, whether "online technologies could bring us together more offline."

In the short history of the Internet, attention has fallen on one or two online technologies at a time. E-mails and message boards shifted to web sites and then blogs and social networking pages. What we see now is a proliferation of technologies that are used for civic purposes. The older technologies remain most common but they have been joined by new ones.

FIGURE 4  
INTERNET USE TO EXPRESS  
OPINIONS ABOUT POLITICAL,  
SOCIAL, OR COMMUNITY ISSUES



### 18 Million Bloggers

Some technologies do not draw large proportions of people, but they still represent mass phenomena. For example, 7.7 percent of the sample claimed that they used their own blogs (online diaries or frequently updated web pages) to discuss political, social, or community issues. That is a minority, but it would still constitute approximately 18 million Americans. We suspect that self-identified bloggers include people who use the blog or daily notes features on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook.

While activities on the Internet may not have as much civic value as face-to-face participation, much important civic and political work is now happening online. Over the past few months,

sites such as YouTube have hosted political debates or featured announcements from candidates launching their candidacies for President.

Americans also use a wide range of Internet technologies to collect or follow the news. Some of the sites that people use are basically online versions of traditional news organizations such as metropolitan daily newspapers. But an important recent development is the proliferation of sites that allow visitors to share their own material and to vote on what others have posted.

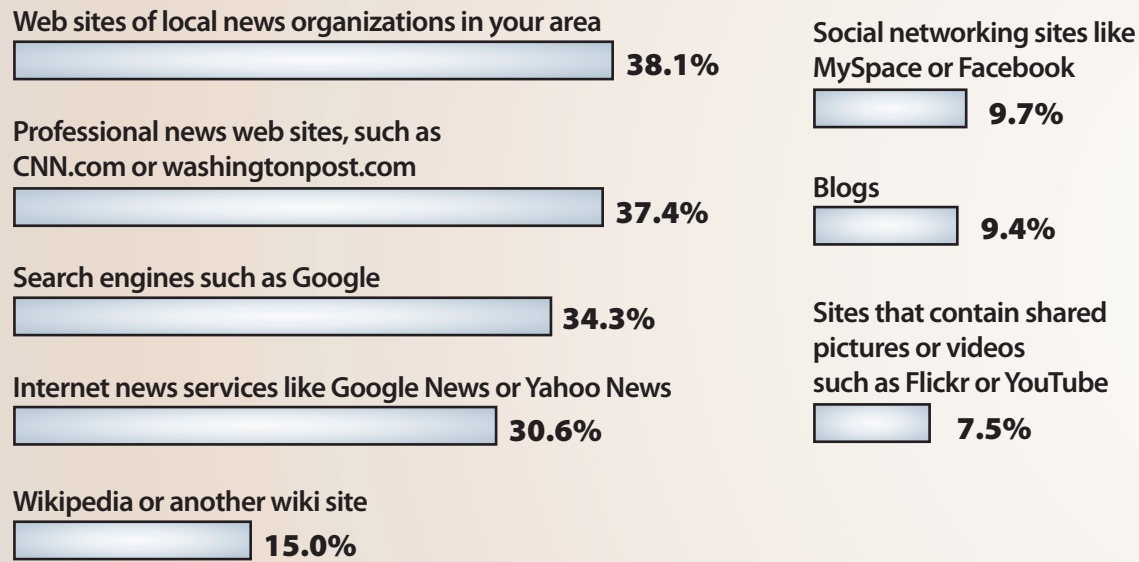


FIGURE 5  
INTERNET USE TO GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT POLITICAL, SOCIAL, OR COMMUNITY ISSUES

Another way of asking about online civic engagement is to pose questions about the reasons that people use the Internet. The most common civic purposes include signing petitions and visiting campaign web sites.

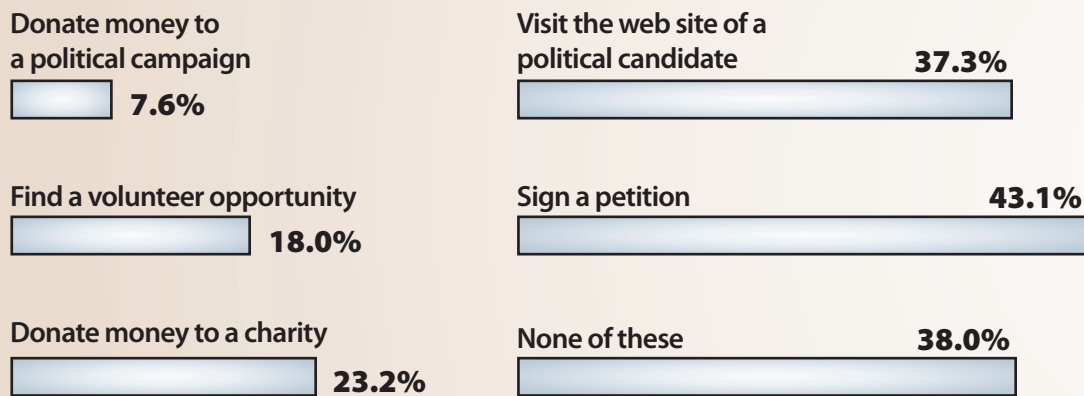


FIGURE 6  
CIVIC USES OF THE INTERNET



## NETIZENS: ENGAGING ONLINE (CONT.)

### The Most Engaged—41 Million "Netizens"

Just as we focused above on a minority of citizens who perform "citizen-centered" work, we now focus on a group of deeply engaged online citizens. We call the people who use the Internet for three or more civic purposes "netizens." They constitute **24 percent of the population, or 41 million people**, according to our sample.

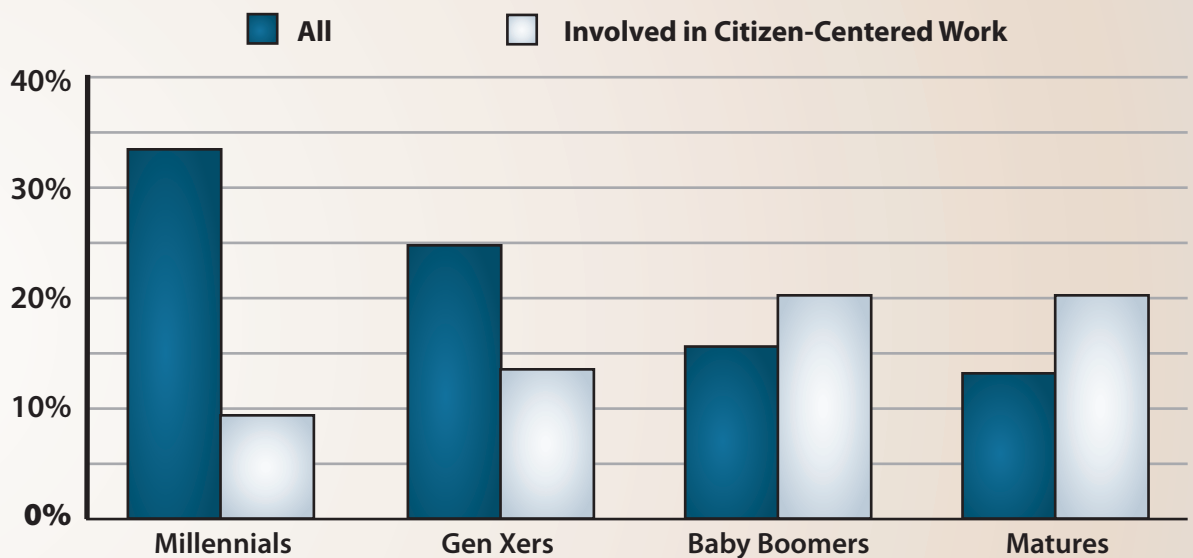
Contrary to predictions that the Internet might replace face-to-face participation, the survey finds no tradeoff. In fact, the netizens are much more likely than other people to attend public meetings in which there was discussion of community affairs (38 percent versus 23 percent), attend a club meeting (72 percent versus 47 percent) or take part in a protest or demonstration (31 percent versus 15 percent).

Being a Netizen also correlates with doing "citizen-centered" work. Of those who are citizen-centered, 36 percent are also netizens. Of those who are not citizen-centered, only 22 percent are netizens.

### An Age Effect—Active Seniors Offline & Baby Boomers and Matures More Active Online

Despite the general correlation between the netizens and those who are engaged in "citizen-centered" work, these are not identical populations. The most obvious difference involves age. Older people are more likely to be involved in "citizen-centered" work but less likely to be netizens; and these differences are pronounced.

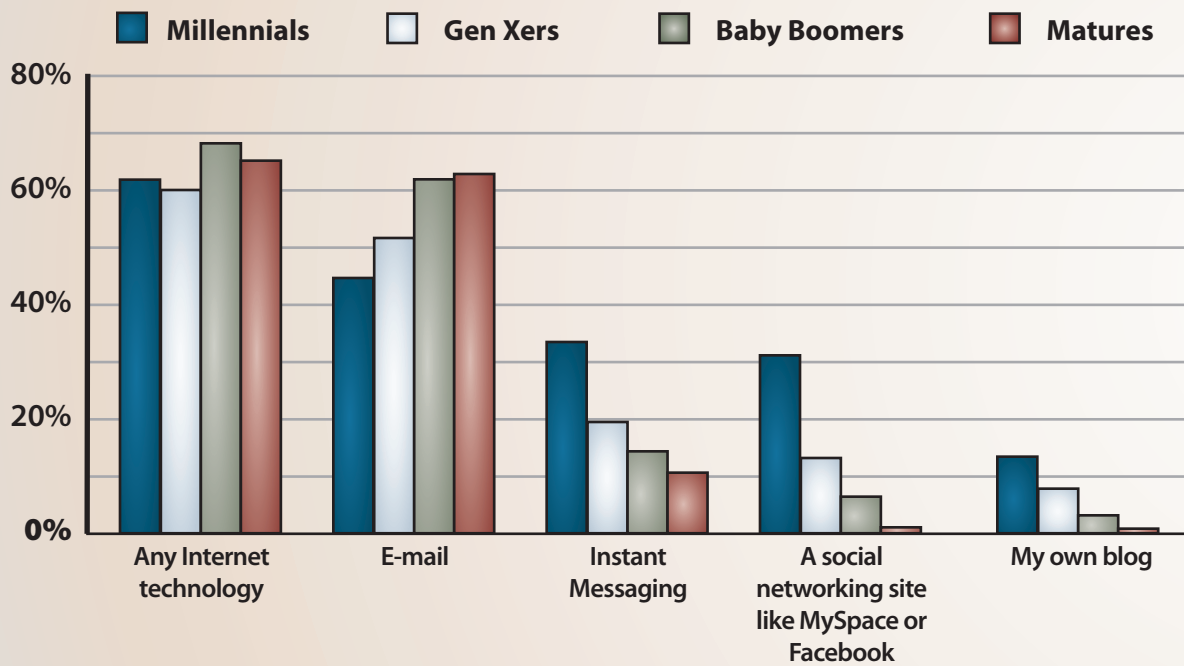
FIGURE 7  
TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT,  
BY AGE



Age also influences the specific technologies that people use for civic purposes. For example, 38 percent of teenagers (age 13-17) use Instant Messaging to express their views about social, political or community issues, compared to 11 percent of seniors. Ten percent of 13-17-year-olds have used their own blog for political, social, or community purposes, compared to one percent of senior citizens. Chat rooms are not especially popular among teenagers.

Even though the younger generations are more likely to be netizens than their elders, the oldest generations are more likely to use more established Internet technologies, such as e-mail, for political and social purposes. Young people are more likely to use blogs, social networking sites, YouTube, or wiki sites to get information about political or social issues than their adult counterparts. However, Gen Xers and Baby Boomers are more likely to use Google or professional news web sites to gather information about political or social issues than their younger or older counterparts.

When we combine all technologies, we find, surprisingly, that **Baby Boomers and Matures are more likely to use the Internet to express opinions on social and political issues than young people or Gen-Xers.** This pattern is driven by e-mail, still the leading tool for online civic communication.

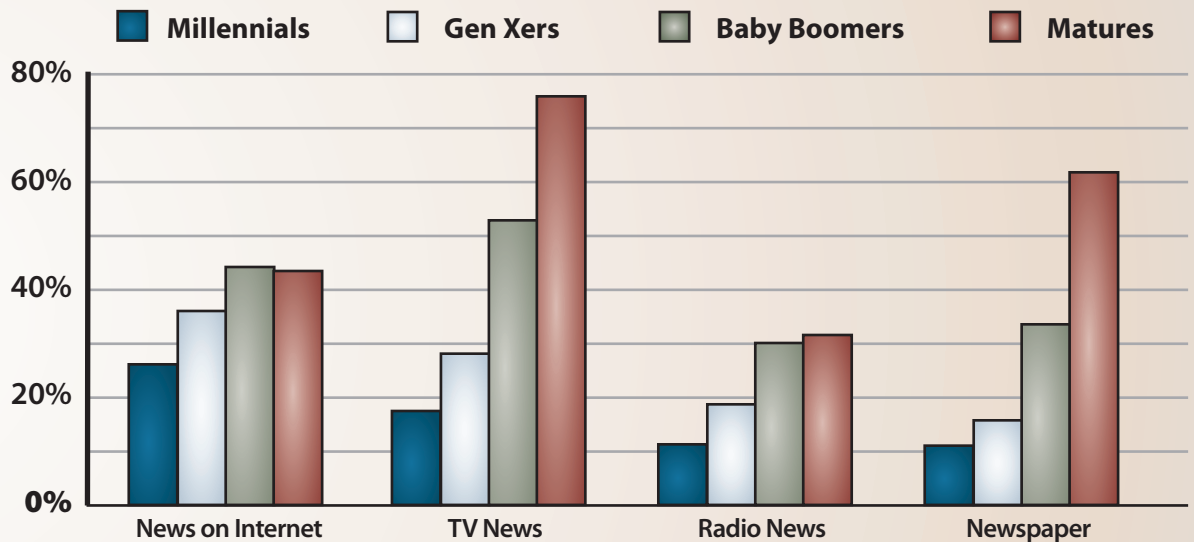


**FIGURE 8**  
**INTERNET USE TO EXPRESS OPINIONS ABOUT POLITICAL, SOCIAL, OR COMMUNITY ISSUES**

## NETIZENS: ENGAGING ONLINE (CONT.)

Similarly, the Millennials are the least likely to use all major sources of news, including the Internet. They lag the furthest behind in newspaper readership, but even online, the oldest Americans far surpass the Millennials as news consumers.

FIGURE 9  
DAILY NEWS  
CONSUMPTION, BY AGE



It appears that younger generations are more comfortable online and adopt new online tools more quickly, but they are less interested in civic and political issues and therefore relatively *unlikely* to use technology to obtain news or express opinions. Besides, the older generations are now comfortable enough with established technologies, such as e-mail and web browsers, that they can outpace their children and grandchildren's generations in online civic engagement.

Young people are most likely to have used the Internet to find opportunities to volunteer. (Other data show that they have high volunteering rates, in general.) However, the "Matures"—those born before 1945—are most likely to have used the Internet to donate money to a political campaign, reflecting their generally high level of wealth and political engagement. The Matures are the least likely to say they have used the Internet to find a civic engagement opportunity, yet over half in our sample have used the Internet for such activities.

## DELIBERATING: 41 MILLION ENGAGED WITH DIVERSE GROUPS

We define public deliberation as talking civilly and constructively with others who have diverse views about important issues. It is a crucial complement to voting, volunteering, and activism, because it informs our judgment and exposes us to alternative perspectives.

There is increasing interest today in public deliberation. On the one hand, studies show that Americans generally do not engage in diverse and civil voluntary conversations about public issues, a trend that has provoked much research and discussion. On the other hand, numerous promising programs have developed since the 1970s to encourage deliberation: for example, National Issues Forums, Study Circles, Deliberative Polls™, AmericaSpeaks' Twenty-First Century Town Meetings™, Choices for the 21st Century Education Project, and the American Democracy Project of the American Association of State Colleges & Universities.

In our survey, we ask two questions to identify "deliberators" by a fairly stringent definition. We first ask whether, "within the last year," respondents have "been involved in a meeting (either face-to-face or online) to determine ideas and solutions for problems" in their communities. Of those who say yes, we ask whether the discussion included people who held views different from the respondent's own. **The combination of these two questions yields a group—18 percent of the whole sample, or 41 million Americans—who have been involved in open-ended, practical discussions with people of diverse views.**

People who are involved in "citizen-centered" work (i.e., discussing and acting on issues) are most likely to have experienced conversations with people who hold views different from their own. Netizens are more likely than non-netizens to have experienced such diverse conversations, but a majority of netizens do not have such conversations.

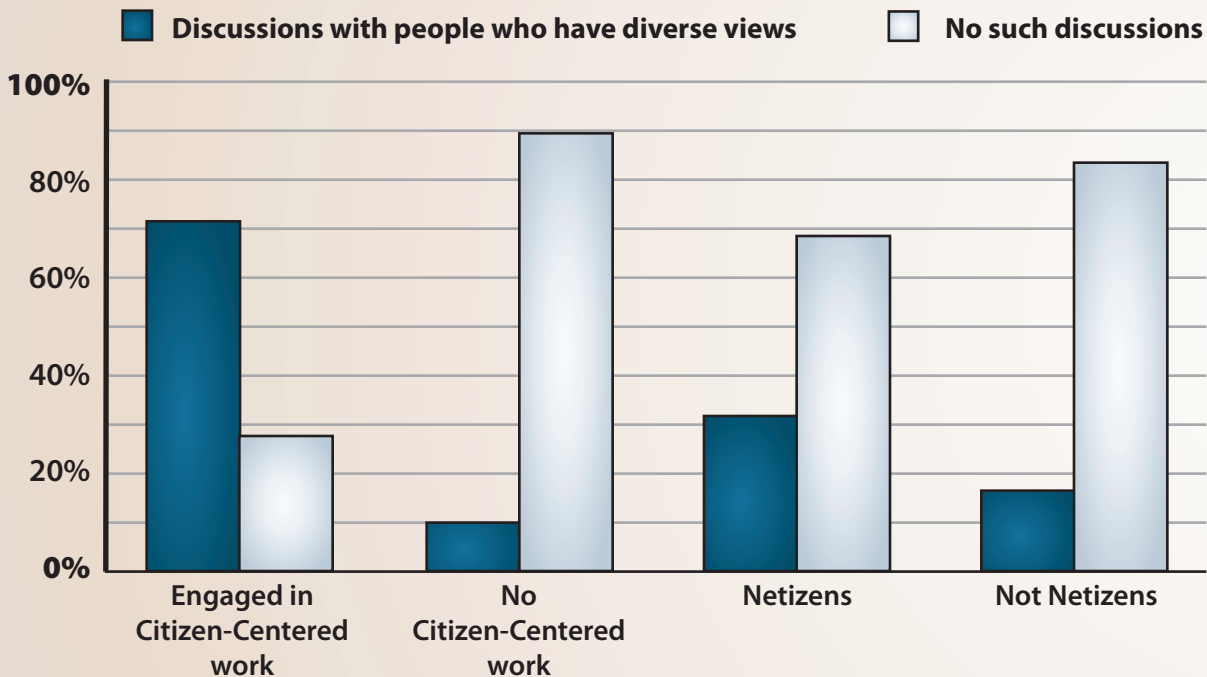


FIGURE 10  
DIVERSE DISCUSSIONS

## DELIBERATING: 41 MILLION ENGAGED WITH DIVERSE GROUPS (CONT.)

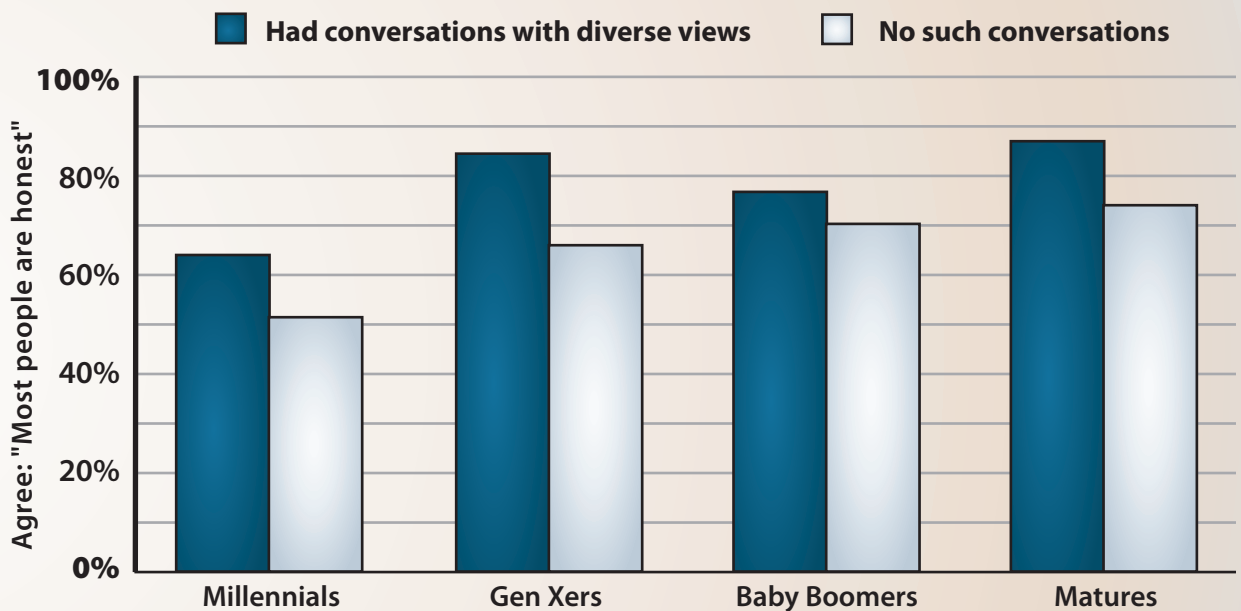
Those who have deliberated have distinctive beliefs about politics and civil society. Compared to other Americans, they are much more likely to say that:

- The best way to address issues is for citizens to work together with other groups (65 percent of deliberators versus 50 percent of other people).
- They like to address problems by attending meetings sponsored by citizens' groups (60 percent of deliberators versus 36 percent of other people).
- It is important to help those in need (88 percent of deliberators versus 76 percent of other people). This finding suggests that deliberation either requires or engenders empathy.

In order to deliberate, one needs appropriate opportunities and venues. Seventy-nine percent of deliberators say there is a place in their community where they can go to discuss issues, versus just 34 percent of other people. Either having a place to go to talk encourages deliberation, or people who are committed to deliberation know about or *create* such places.

In general, deliberators are more trusting than non-deliberators. Presumably, we are more likely to participate in diverse conversations if we trust our fellow citizens; and participation engenders trust.

FIGURE 11  
TRUST AND EXPERIENCE  
WITH DIVERSE  
CONVERSATIONS, BY AGE



# AN APPETITE FOR CIVIC PARTICIPATION

For those who believe that civic engagement is valuable, a crucial question is how many Americans *want* to engage. Most people are not participating today, and that could be because they do not have opportunities or encouragement to work on public issues, because of a real or perceived lack of time, or because Americans lack the knowledge, confidence, or motivation to participate.

When the British Government recently committed to a strategy of civic engagement, the *Guardian* columnist Polly Tyonbee wrote skeptically, "there is no clamour for community involvement. It is a top-down prescription in a time when people have deserted the churches, the Rotary Club, the WI, political parties and trade unions. They don't tell the pollsters they hanker after committees, minutes and points of order."

Then again, Americans are rarely asked about their interest in participating. According to our survey, a majority (52 percent) of respondents say it is very important or extremely important "for government agencies (such as schools, police, public hospitals, etc.) to give citizens, like yourself, opportunities to play serious, responsible roles in the work of those agencies." These are habits and attitudes Americans have expressed since the founding of the country.

## **About Half Say Military Service is Important; Two-Thirds Community Service**

When asked about **the importance to them personally of serving their country in the military, about half (48 percent) say it is extremely, very or fairly important, while the other half (52 percent) say that it is somewhat important or not at all important.** When Americans are asked about the importance of community service, however, the numbers rise significantly, **with 67 percent saying it is extremely, very or fairly important, and only 33 percent saying it is somewhat important or not at all important.** Commitment to serving in the military is higher among older Americans, but commitment to community service is highest among the young (especially those below age 18). Support for community service is virtually the same among men and women, but men are more likely to consider military service important to them personally (52 percent of men versus 43 percent of women).

## AN APPETITE FOR CIVIC PARTICIPATION (CONT.)

Two-thirds of Americans say that it is very important to them personally to volunteer in their communities, yet Census data show that less than one-third are doing so. Perhaps some survey respondents exaggerate their willingness to serve. One wonders, however, whether part of the reason is inadequate capacity to absorb more people who want to serve and whether our country should spend more time strengthening community and national service programs, including our nation's volunteer centers that work at the community level as well as service opportunities offered through schools well-positioned to reach the greatest number of young people.

We have seen great demand for national service programs in recent years. In 2002, there were 215,000 requests for applications for the Peace Corps, yet the Peace Corps only had 7,500 slots. Community and national service programs repeatedly report that there are far more volunteers who want to sign up for their programs than they can effectively use or manage. Perhaps TIME's recent cover story on national service and its "10 Point Plan" can help prompt a national debate about how our country can strengthen service opportunities for more Americans.

National service could be a key tool in generating a greater sense of "we," especially bridging ethnic and racial divides. Just as the military brings together people from diverse backgrounds and unites them around common ideals, national service could help to inculcate a sense of duty and unity among Americans.

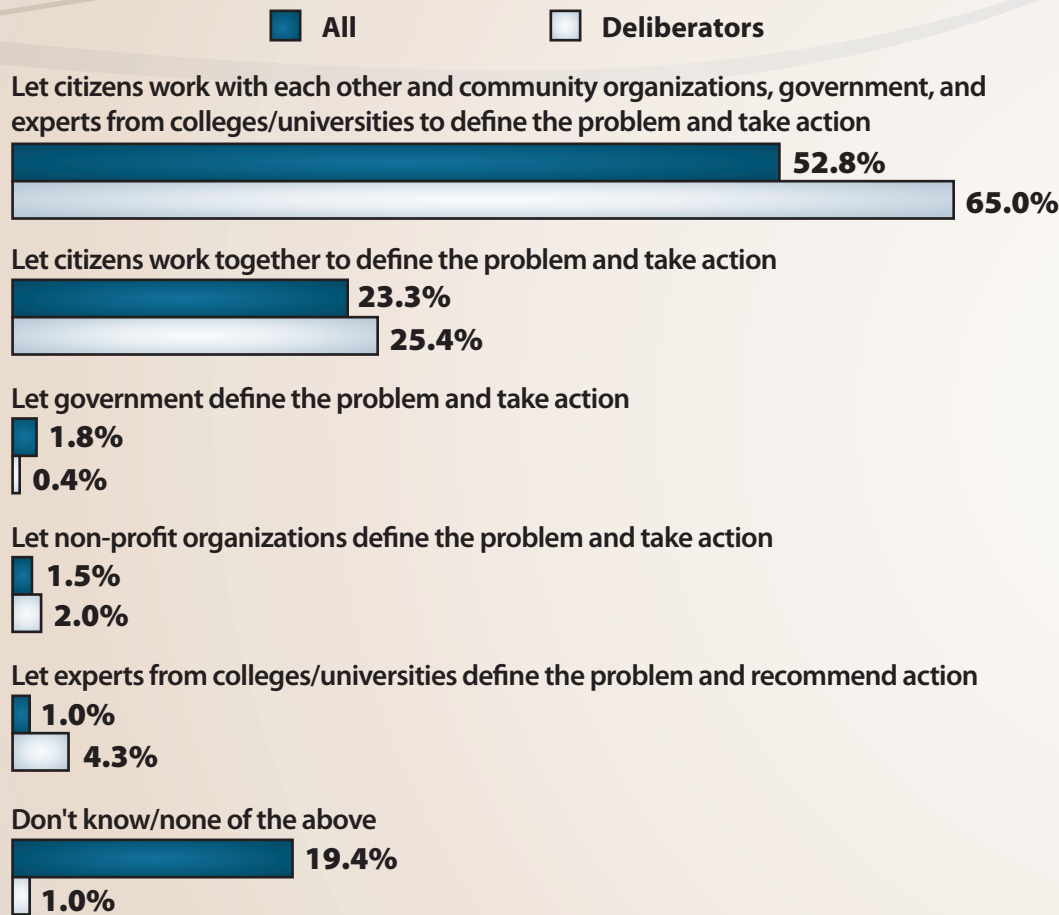
Americans also long for more spaces in their communities where they can discuss public issues. Just 43 percent of respondents say there is a place where they can go to discuss issues facing their communities. Of those who lack a place to go, 26 percent consider it a serious problem. This apparently reflects some appetite or pent-up demand for participation.

Asked what is the best way to address problems in their community, very few choose "let the government define the problem and take action." An outright majority favors collaboration between citizens and institutions. Deliberators are especially likely to choose that option. Deliberators are also much more likely than other people to have a view about how issues should be addressed.



## BEST WAY TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

FIGURE 12



Given a choice of strategies for addressing issues and being involved, the largest group (68 percent) says that they prefer to vote. This is a ritual in American life and a right for which many fought hard. The act of voting symbolizes our democracy and elects representatives at all levels. No other strategy attains more than 50 percent support, but the most popular are participating in community meetings (40 percent) and "gathering with other citizens to identify problems, develop solutions and take community driven action" (also 40 percent). Meetings sponsored by government agencies and churches receive less support, and only 25 percent prefer to "find people that share your beliefs who will demand action from the government." This is perhaps evidence that people are not as ideological or cause-driven as we might assume. At least in theory, they would rather attend a diverse and open-ended meeting than one organized by someone with an agenda.

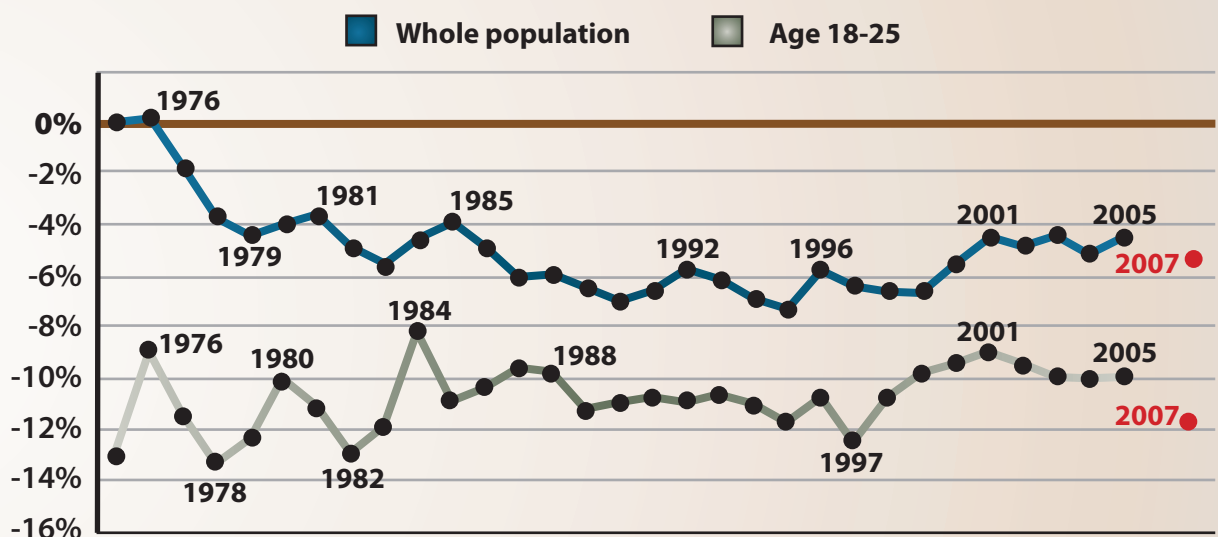
Forty-four percent of people say that they would be more involved if they "had more opportunities to work with others on serious public problems affecting [the] community." However, only 16 percent would be very likely or extremely likely to be more involved.

# MILLENNIALS EMERGE: A NEW CIVIC GENERATION?

The youngest generation forms a large group, rivaling the Baby Boomers in sheer numbers. According to the Census, in 2007, living Millennials outnumbered living Baby Boomers: 77.6 million to 74.1 million.<sup>7</sup> They have a distinctive political and civic character that will be important for America's future. Adolescence and early adulthood are formative years that permanently shape the character of generations.

In some ways, the Millennials are impressively involved in civic affairs. For example, volunteering rates rose substantially for young Americans over the last generation and remain at historically high levels. Today's young people are more likely to belong to clubs or to serve as club officers than Generation-Xers are today.<sup>8</sup> Youth voter turnout is low, but it rose significantly in both 2004 and 2006, as the first Millennials reached voting age. Overall, most of the decline in our civic health over the past twenty years can be attributed to older generations (Boomers and Matures). Young people have always been less civically engaged than their elders, although this age gap narrowed between 1975 and 1990s and 2000s.

FIGURE 13  
CIVIC HEALTH INDEX  
(2007 ESTIMATE), BY AGE



## Trust

One of the most pronounced differences among the generations involves trust. Today's young people are by far the least likely to trust others, regardless of how the question is phrased. This distrust may prove an obstacle to fostering greater civic engagement and participation.

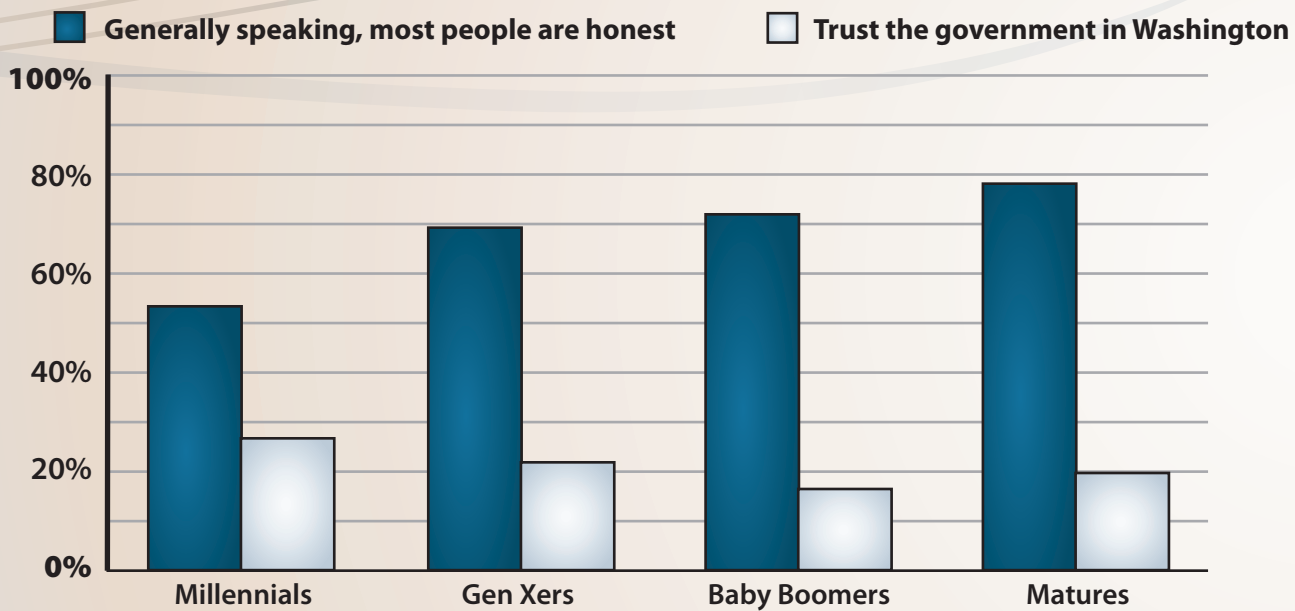


FIGURE 14  
TRUST, BY AGE

Trust in government presents a different picture. Overall, Americans deeply distrust the government today, especially at the federal level. However, young people express the least distrust for government. They are least likely to say that it wastes money, is run by special interests, or is full of crooks. On the other hand, they are also the least likely to think that their own vote counts or that people like themselves have a say. In short, they feel relatively little power but also relatively little anger about the performance of the government. Finally, they have the least trust for the news media, with three quarters saying that it cannot be trusted to present the news fairly.

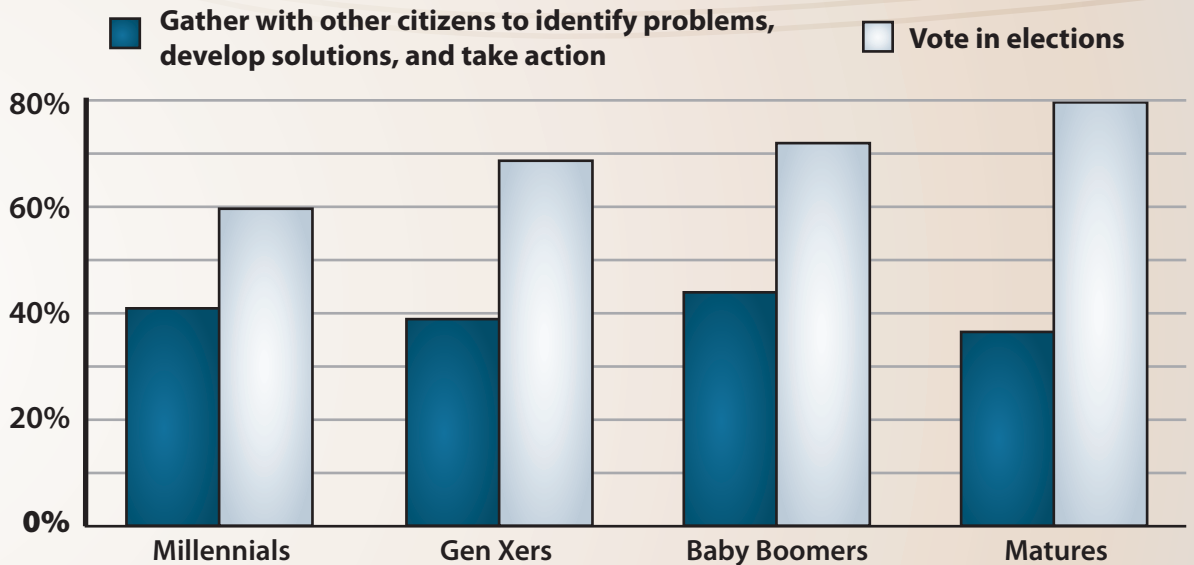
### Political Views

Generally, young people hold more critical or adversarial political opinions than their elders. They are less likely to agree that it is important always to follow the rules, and less likely to say that people basically receive fair treatment in America regardless of who they are.

When asked how best to address issues in their community, young people are the least enthusiastic about voting but are more favorable toward citizen-centered politics than Gen Xers or Matures. This pattern is consistent with the low voting rates but high volunteering rates of young people.

# MILLENNIALS EMERGE: A NEW CIVIC GENERATION? (CONT.)

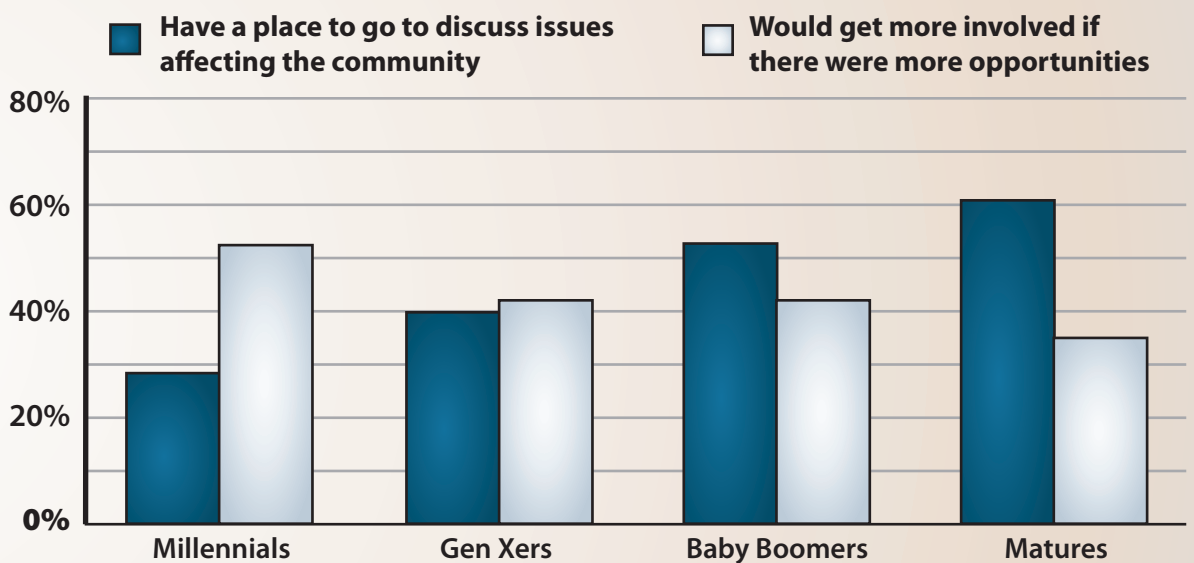
FIGURE 15  
VOTING VERSUS  
CITIZEN-CENTERED  
ENGAGEMENT, BY AGE



Millennials are the most open to learning through discussion. For those who were involved in a meeting to determine ideas for problems in their community, 45 percent of the Millennials said that the discussion changed their minds. This compares to only 20 percent of Matures who recalled changing their minds as a result of discussion. Openness to learning is greater the younger one is.

More than any other group, the Millennials lack—but want—venues for citizen-centered politics. This is important evidence in favor of providing high school students, college students, and young adults with more opportunities for discussion and civic action.

FIGURE 16  
OPPORTUNITIES  
AND DEMAND FOR  
ENGAGEMENT, BY AGE



# GAPS IN PARTICIPATION: THE POWER OF A GOOD EDUCATION

It is very important that participation in civic and political affairs be as representative as possible. Participation brings benefits to communities and confers power on those who engage. Civic engagement also benefits individuals, helping them to flourish in other aspects of life. If only privileged Americans dominate in civil society, our communities will suffer and we will lose the full range of voices and energies.

*Education* marks the great gap in civic participation today. Overall, the differences by race, ethnicity, and gender are small. But this study, like much previous research, finds that Americans with more years of education are more likely to participate in politics and civil society: in fact, that is the "best documented finding in American political behavior research."<sup>9</sup> **The one bright spot is that education is less correlated with Internet-based civic activities than with other forms of civic participation.** Although there are challenges to making Internet-based participation as beneficial to participants (for instance, online "communities" are more transient and dispersed, and it may be harder to build trust online), the Internet may still provide an opportunity to strengthen and equalize civic participation.

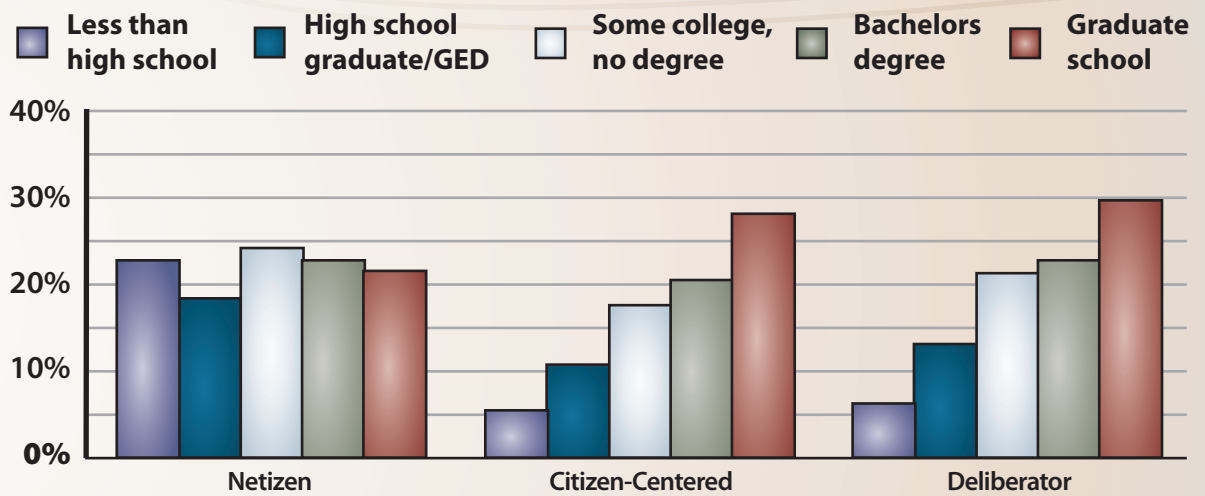
In this report, we classify people in four categories of educational attainment:

- Less than a high school diploma or a High School degree
- Some college experience, but no degree
- A degree, but no graduate school experience
- Graduate experience or a graduate degree

Overall, the more educated are more engaged in their communities and have a strong sense of political and social efficacy. Education correlates especially strongly with deliberation and engagement in citizen-centered activities. **Those with less education are almost as likely as their more educated counterparts to participate in Internet civic activities, regardless of their age.**

# GAPS IN PARTICIPATION: THE POWER OF A GOOD EDUCATION? (CONT.)

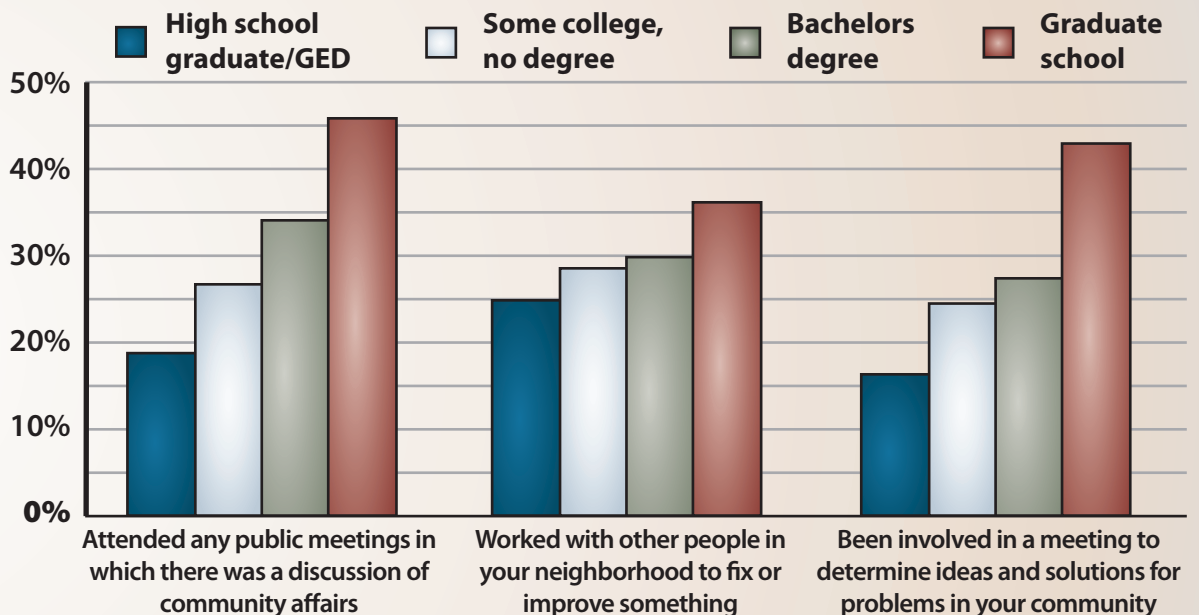
FIGURE 17  
TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT,  
BY EDUCATIONAL  
ATTAINMENT



## Connectedness

According to the survey, the more educated and less educated are equally connected to their families. However, people with more education tended to grow up in families with more discussion of politics. Their parents were more likely to encourage them to express opinions and were more active in their communities. The most educated also are more likely to discuss politics with their friends than those who are less educated.

FIGURE 18  
CITIZEN-CENTERED  
ACTIVITIES, BY  
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



## Citizen-Centered activities

Educational attainment and the extent and frequency of engagement in citizen-centered activities are strongly positively correlated. Those with the lowest levels of educational attainment are the most disconnected from their communities, while those with graduate experience are most connected, often working with others to address issues in their communities.

### Least Educated Show Appetite for More Engagement

Furthermore, those with more education are leaders in their communities, being more likely to say they had helped start an organization than those with no college education. **The least educated are least likely to say they have a place to go to discuss community issues, but they are just as likely as college graduates to want to get involved if more opportunities were available.**

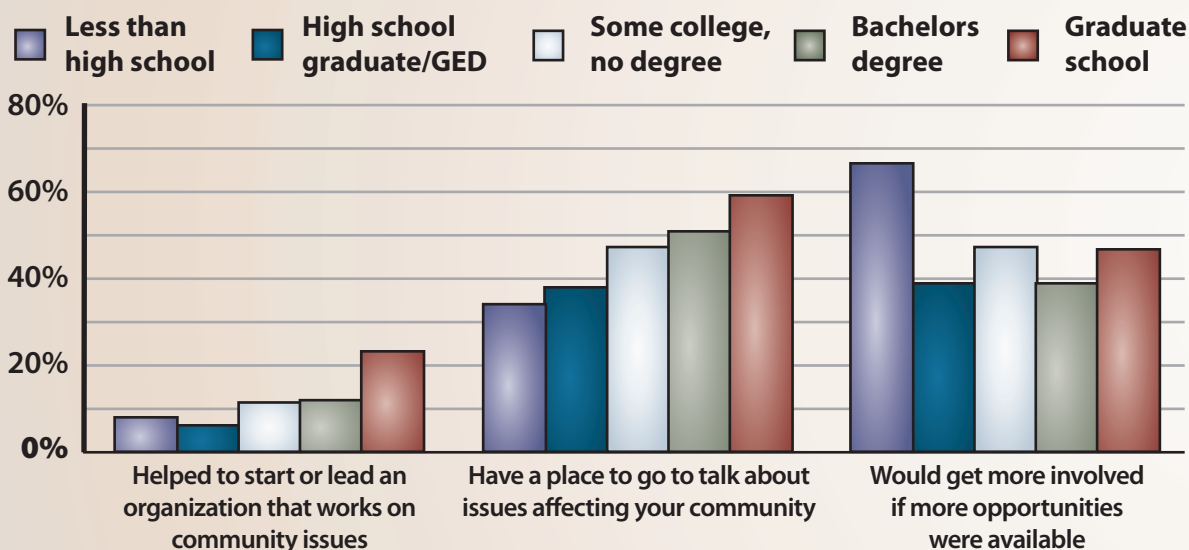


FIGURE 19  
CIVIC OPPORTUNITIES,  
BY EDUCATIONAL  
ATTAINMENT

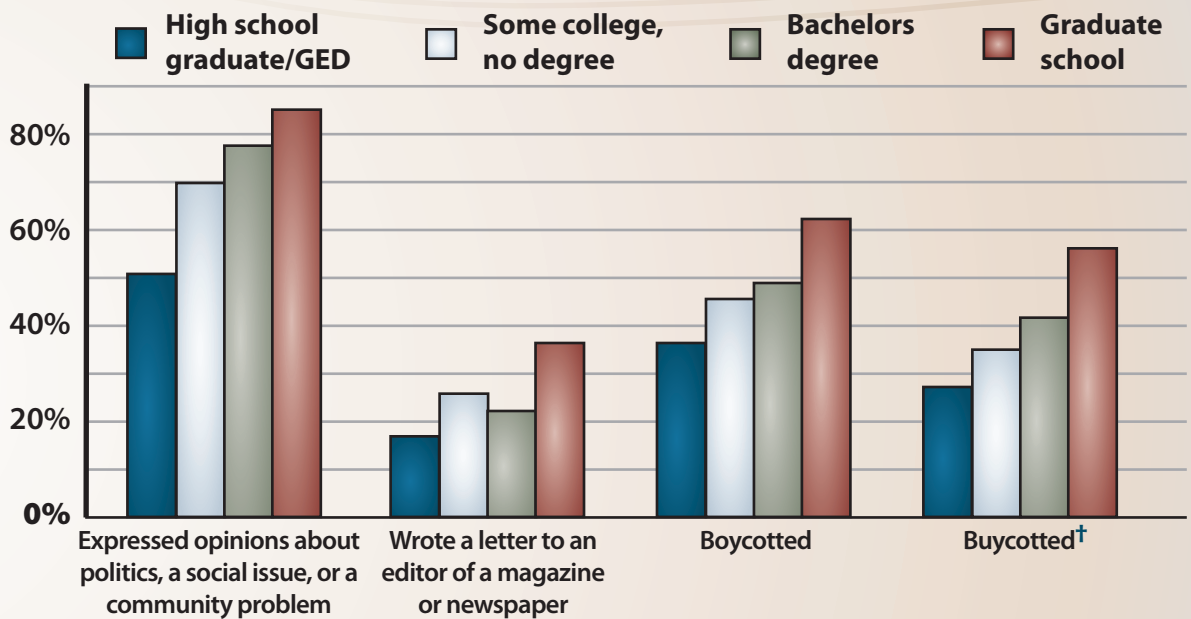
The least educated are the least politically efficacious. They are more likely than their more educated counterparts to say government is "complicated and hard to understand," and they are more likely to say people like them do not have a say in what the government does. This lack of efficacy is reflected in lower levels of political involvement. Compared to those who have more education, the least educated are the least likely to be registered to vote, vote regularly, be mobilized in an election, or participate in political activities like attending rallies. They are also the least likely to have tried to persuade others in the last election how to vote or wear a campaign button.

This lack of efficacy is also reflected in expression of voice. The least educated are the least likely to say they have expressed their opinion, either through contacting a newspaper or consumer activism.



## GAPS IN PARTICIPATION: THE POWER OF A GOOD EDUCATION? (CONT.)

FIGURE 20  
EXPRESSION OF VOICE,  
BY EDUCATIONAL  
ATTAINMENT

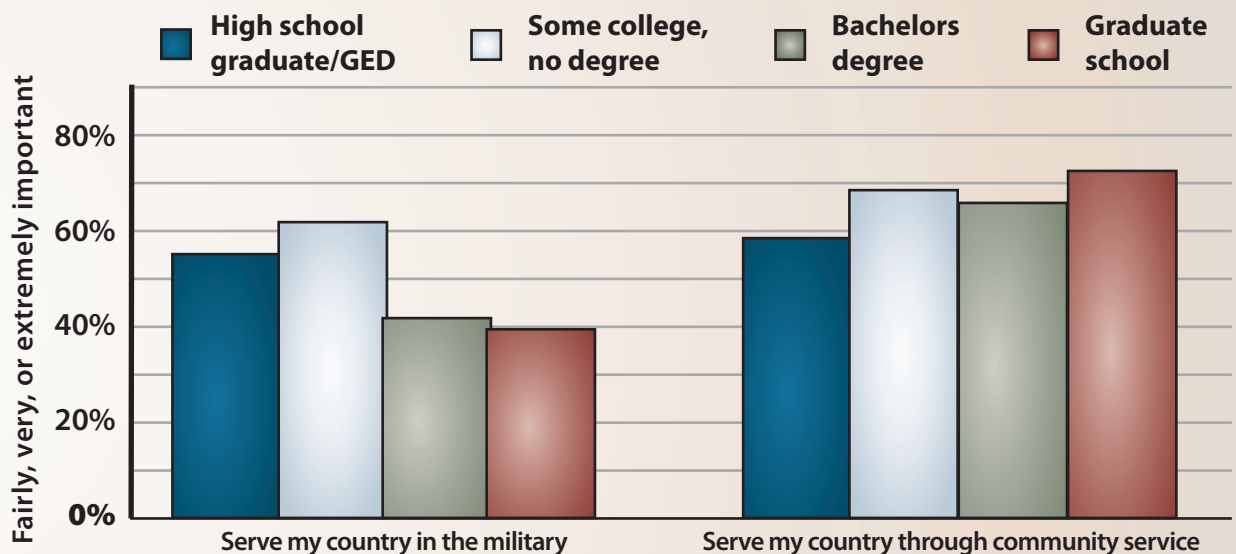


†Buycotting refers to buying a product to support a cause

### The Military-Community Service Gap between the Least & Better Educated

With regard to national service, the less educated are more likely to agree that military service is a personally important way to serve the nation. The more educated are more likely to see community service as an important way to serve the nation.

FIGURE 21  
IMPORTANCE TO ME  
OF SERVING, BY  
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



# CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

The civic health of the nation, especially as measured by the frequency of basic activities such as voting and volunteering, is weak by historical standards. This is disappointing, especially given that many foreign observers have identified our civic habits as distinguishing Americans. The good news is that millions of Americans are civically engaged in demanding and impressive ways, including through new forms of online technologies. The youngest generation, while in some ways disconnected, is demonstrating strong civic habits. And perhaps the most hopeful news is that there is a core of millions of Americans who are the most civically active, and millions more who have a strong appetite for being engaged further. We hope that this report prompts discussion about how to support our most engaged citizens, increase their number, and make sure that everyone—including young people and the less privileged—have opportunities to participate in the civic lives of their communities and nation.

## METHODOLOGY

To conduct American's Civic Health Index Survey for the National Conference on Citizenship, Harris Interactive Inc. obtained web interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3,522 U.S. residents ages 14 and older. The survey questionnaire was self-administered via the Internet. A stratified random sample of Harris Interactive's opt-in online panel was invited through password-protected e-mail invitations to participate in a survey about current events. Propensity score weighting, a proprietary Harris Interactive technique, was applied to adjust for respondents' likelihood to be online. The survey was conducted between June 21 and July 11, 2007 with an average interview length of 20 minutes. Statistical results are weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is  $\pm 3$  percentage points. Further details on the design, execution and analysis of the survey are discussed in the companion document "American's Civic Health Index 2007 Toptlines and Survey Methodology."

# GLOSSARY

## Definitions used in this report

**Generations:** "Matures" were born before 1945; Baby Boomers, between 1945 and 1964; Generation X, between 1965 and 1974; and Millennials, since 1975.

**Citizen-centered engagement:** A combination of discussing issues *and* directly working on those issues. We count people as having been involved in citizen-centered work if they attended any public meeting in which there was discussion of a community issue *and* worked with other people in their neighborhood to improve something.

**Netizen:** A person who is heavily engaged in civic and political affairs using online technologies. We define this group as those who use the Internet for three or more civic or political purposes.

**Deliberator:** A person who has been involved in a meeting (either face-to-face or online) to determine ideas and solutions for problems in the community within the last year, if the discussion involved people with diverse views.

**Note:** These are *not* mutually exclusive categories. They overlap substantially.

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1986); David T. Z. Mindich, *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The year 2005 is not shown because too many data points are missing.

<sup>3</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve in 1835 (revised edition, New York, Vintage Books, 1954), vol. 2, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Gibson, *Citizens at the Center: A New Approach to Civic Engagement* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> The questions were: (1) Would you say that either one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? (2) Whose responsibility is it to finally decide whether a law is constitutional or not? (3) How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a Presidential veto?

<sup>7</sup> US Census Bureau's March Current Population Supplement 2006, tabulations by CIRCLE.

<sup>8</sup> This may be because many Millennials are still in schools and colleges that offer clubs; their rate of participation may fall when they graduate. In general, a survey conducted at a single point cannot differentiate between the effects of belonging to a generation that has an enduring character versus the effects of being at a certain age. For example, Millennials are more trusting of government than older people are, and that could be a generational trait or a temporary consequence of being young.

<sup>9</sup> Norman H. Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America* (Chicago, 1996), p. 31.

