

## What do Young Adults Know about Politics? Evidence from a National Survey Conducted After the 2012 Election

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Many people assume that young adults are not prepared to vote knowledgeably. Only 24% of 12th graders scored at the “proficient” level on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics. But the NAEP Civics assessment only measures certain kinds of knowledge, and its definition of “proficient” is open to debate.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, starting on the day after the 2012 Election, CIRCLE surveyed 4,483 young Americans (ages 18-24), including oversamples of African American and Latino youth. We asked the entire sample whether they had voted (and for whom) and posed some general factual questions about the US political system.

We also asked respondents to choose one issue of particular interest to them. They were then asked to express their own opinion on this issue and to answer two factual questions about where President Obama and Governor Romney stood on the issue.

Major findings:

- On some topics, young people were informed. More than three in four young voters could correctly answer at least one factual question about the candidates’ position on a campaign issue that they had chosen as important. And on some questions about the structure of the US government, they performed as well or better than older adults who have been asked similar questions in other polls.
- On other topics, most young people were misinformed. For instance, a majority (51.2%) believed that the federal government spends more on

foreign aid than on Social Security, when in fact Social Security costs about 20 times more. But again, older adults have also been found to be widely misinformed on the same topics.

- About one quarter of young voters were poorly informed about the campaign's issues, and young people who did *not* vote were generally uninformed.
- Young people who recalled high-quality civic education experiences in high school were more likely to vote, to form political opinions, to know campaign issues, and to know general facts about the US political system. That does not mean that civics *causes* higher turnout and more knowledge, because students who experience better civics may also have other advantages in their schools and communities. But the correlations are very strong and at least demonstrate that active and informed citizens tend to be people who had good civic education. Civic education was not related to partisanship or choice of candidate, and that may allay concerns that civics affects young people's ideologies.
- The level of misinformation was almost identical among young Romney supporters and young Obama supporters. But more Romney voters held positions on issues that they knew contradicted the candidate's positions. More than one quarter of Romney supporters chose the liberal position on the issue that they considered very important for the country. Even though Romney was defeated among 18-24s by 54.7%-28.1%, according to our poll, he got some of his votes despite his stance on issues.<sup>2</sup>

The survey was funded by the Spencer Foundation and is one research product that will inform CIRCLE's Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, which is funded by Spencer, the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, the W.T. Grant Foundation, and the Chicago Community Trust.

## **Results**

### *Knowledge*

We asked two kinds of questions about knowledge. One was a battery of general questions about the US political system, asked of all respondents. The other was a set of questions about the candidates' stands on one issue that respondents considered most important for the country.

### *General Knowledge of the Political System*

Table 1 shows responses to general questions about the US political system for respondents who said they had voted in 2012.

*Table 1: Knowledge of US Political System (voters age 18-24)*

topic	percent correct	percent incorrect	other responses, including "do not know."
Does the government spend more on Social Security or foreign aid?	29.0%	51.3%	19.7%
Which party (if any) is more conservative?	53.3%	16.0% chose "Democrats as more conservative" and 16.4% said neither party is more conservative	14.4%
Which party controls the US House?	42.2%	22.7%	35.1%
How much of a majority does Congress need to override a veto	38.7%	13.8%	47.5%
Who has a right to vote in federal elections?	48.6%	45.1%	6.2%

On some of these questions, rough comparisons are available to older populations:

- In July 2012, The Pew Research Center asked adults (18+) which party controlled the House of Representatives, and 40% knew that the Republicans had the majority.<sup>3</sup> Young people in our survey scored somewhat better (42.4%), albeit several months later.
- In 2011, CNN and the Opinion Research Corporation asked adults how much of the budget the federal government allocates to various programs. The median estimate was 20% for Social Security (which is close to the correct proportion), but 10% for foreign aid (which is more than 10 times too high).<sup>4</sup>
- In 2008, the American National Election Study asked adults which party was more conservative, and 67% thought it was the Republican Party, versus 16% who thought it was the Democrats and 17% who said "both" or "neither" or indicated that they did not know. In our survey, conducted

four years later and restricted to young adults, 53.3% of all respondents chose the Republicans.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, these questions reveal the need for better education in schools or during political campaigns, but they do not suggest that young adults are less informed than older adults.

### *Knowledge of Campaign Issues*

We also asked about issues in the 2012 campaign, structuring our questions like this:

- What is the one issue that matters most to you?
- What positions do you take on that issue?
- What positions did Obama and Romney take on two specific policies on this issue?
- Did you vote, and for whom?

This method allowed us to classify young people by how much issue knowledge they had and by whether they voted consistently with their own stance on the issues.

Many respondents (including the non-voters) could correctly identify the candidates' stand on at least one campaign issue. In fact, 42.7% of the people who answered the knowledge questions got one right, and another 24.5% got both correct, leaving 32.8% who could answer neither question correctly or at all.

Further, a majority of voters voted consistently with their understanding of where the candidates stood on the issues:

- Of those who voted, 55.9% could identify one important issue, correctly identify where the candidates stood on at least one policy (out of two), and voted consistently with their preference.
- Another 20% could correctly identify the candidates' stand on at least one policy and could state their own opinion of it, but they voted inconsistently with their own views on that issue. That is not necessarily a sign of poor information because voters may have other reasons for their decisions (such as trusting one candidate's character, or wanting stability or change).
- Thus up to 75.9% of voters could be considered reasonably well-informed.

But there is clearly room to grow. About one in four (24.1%) of young people who said they had voted fell in the lowest tier of knowledge, not knowing either candidate's views on the issues that they chose as most important.

Also, even with our survey's mild bias toward voters, 40.1% said they didn't vote at all. The young people who did not vote lag far behind the young voters in their political knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

- Just 39.8% of non-voters were able to correctly identify which party was more conservative, compared to 62.5% among the voters.
- Just 57.4% of the non-voters were able to identify the candidates' position on one or more the two campaign policy questions, compared to 74.6% among the voters.
- 24.6% of the non-voters got more than half of the six general political knowledge questions, compared to 42.5% among the voters. On average, non-voters got two out of six questions correctly, while voters got three.

Performance on these questions about campaign issues was correlated weakly with being able to answer general knowledge questions about the US political system.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the two kinds of knowledge *tended* to go together, but there were many exceptions—young people who had one kind of knowledge but not the other.

### *Civic Education Experiences in High School and the Current Knowledge of Young Adults*

Young people learn about politics from family members, community and religious organizations, the media, and campaign speeches, debates, and advertisements, among other sources. Our survey asked questions about all of these learning opportunities, but in this fact sheet we focus on school experiences. As noted earlier, the associations between civic education and informed political participation do not prove that civics boosts voting or knowledge, as the relationship may be more complicated than that. But the correlations are very strong and at least suggest that communities that produce active and informed citizens also provide high-quality civics.

Most (87.8%) respondents recalled taking civics in high school, or a class with another name that involved discussion of social and political issues. This rate is consistent with the fact that 86% of high school seniors in 2009 had a civics, government, or politics course on their transcripts.<sup>8</sup> Most people remembered that their civics classes had addressed voting:

- More than three quarters (76.9%) recalled that their teachers had encouraged them to vote.
- Three in five said they had learned about where and how to register to vote while in school.

- And 85.1% remembered learning about voting movements in U.S. History, like the Women's Suffrage Movement or voter drives in the South during the Civil Rights Era.

There was a very clear relationship between studying voting in high school and political participation now. Turnout in 2012 was 63.1% for young people who recalled studying voting in all three of the ways listed above, but it was only 43% for people who recalled none of those experiences. Those who had studied voting also scored better on both kinds of knowledge questions included on our survey.

We also asked respondents whether they recalled any of five learning experiences in their civics class. Previous research has shown that these teaching strategies boost students' political knowledge and interest:<sup>9</sup>

- discussing current events;
- being encouraged by teachers to discuss political and social issues with peers who have different opinions;
- conducting research on social, political, or community issues;
- doing projects in the community; and/or
- being required to keep up with politics or government, either by reading the newspaper, watching TV, or going onto the Internet.

A little over one quarter of respondents said they had not taken civics at all or recalled a maximum of one high-quality experience. Another 31.5% remembered two or three high-quality experiences. The remaining 43.5% could remember four or five relevant civics experience.

High-quality civics experiences in high school predicted higher knowledge and engagement:

- On the questions about the US political system, respondents who recalled having taken no civics often performed very poorly (getting an average of two questions correct), while respondents who recalled at least two or three high-quality civics experiences generally answered at least three questions correctly.
- On the questions about campaign issues, young people who recalled high-quality civics experiences in high school were also more likely to answer at least one question correctly.
- Respondents who recalled these experiences in high school were more likely to register and vote in 2012.
- These experiences were not related to partisanship or to whether young people voted in a manner consistent with their beliefs about specific

- campaign issues. But young people who had low-quality civics experiences were less likely to have *any* political views, and as the quality went up, they were more likely to state a view.
- Finally, these experiences made civics class seem relevant. Of students who remembered zero or one high-quality social studies experiences, just 37.8% thought that their civics class was still relevant to life today. But their belief in the relevance of civics rose if they received more high-quality experiences, reaching 66.6% if they remembered two or three experiences, and 87.3% if they recalled four or five.

According to previous research, another way that schools can enhance political participation is to welcome students to express their own views. We asked respondents to recall their high school years and to say whether students had a say in how the school was run, whether students could respectfully disagree with teachers, whether students were encouraged to express their own opinions, and whether students felt part of a community where people cared about each other. Scoring higher on these measures slightly predicted voting and registration, more strongly predicted political and campaign knowledge, but was not related to ideology, partisanship or voting consistently with one's own policy stances. Young people who reported low democratic climate in their own high schools were, however, more likely to have no political affiliation or not identify an ideology.

### *Knowledge and Partisanship*

Table 2 shows the rate of informed issue voting for young adults who had voted for Governor Romney or President Obama. The proportion who were unable to answer any issue question correctly is strikingly similar, at about 24% of both Obama and Romney voters. Thus neither party's young voters can be described as better informed. The substantial difference is that Romney voters were more likely to disagree with their own candidate on the issue that they had chosen as most important. More than one quarter (27.1%) of Romney voters fell into this category.

*Table 2: Issue Voting by Presidential Candidate Choice (voters ages 18-24)*

	Romney voters	Obama voters
unable to answer either campaign issue question correctly	24.1%	24%
got at least one question right but voted for the candidate who held the opposite view from their own	27.1%	16.5%
got at least one question right and voted consistently	48.8%	59.4%

To look at this question a different way, 51.4% of voters who chose the conservative position on their top policy issue voted for Obama, while 19.1% of voters who chose the liberal position voted for Romney. To vote for a candidate without agreeing with his issue stance does not necessarily imply poor knowledge. It could reflect a desire for perceived superior competence or character. But it appears that a Republican candidate who seeks to surpass Mitt Romney's share of the youth vote will have to attract some conservative youth who preferred Obama in 2012 while also holding onto the significant proportion of Romney voters who indicated support for the liberal position on their top issue.

Our survey also shows that self-identified liberals were more committed to vote for Obama than conservatives were committed to vote for Romney. Strong Democrats and strong Republicans were just as committed to vote for their own party's candidate, but moderate Republicans were more likely than moderate Democrats to vote against their party. Republican youth were overall more diverse in terms of their political opinions.

Very liberal and liberal young voters were most likely to be well-informed issue voters (knowing the candidates' positions on two policies and voting accordingly). However, very conservative voters were more likely to be well-informed issue voters compared to moderates or people who wouldn't place themselves on an ideological spectrum at all. That last group was the least informed.

### *Knowledge and Background Experiences*

Respondents performed better on our knowledge questions if they had grown up in homes with many books (a good measure of socioeconomic advantage), if they were older within the range of our survey, and if they had obtained more education. However, these relationships were not strong, and some expected



relationships were not found. For instance, a respondent's mother's level of education was not a predictor of campaign knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Levine, "What the NAEP Civics Assessment Measures and How Students Perform," CIRCLE fact sheet (Jan. 2013), funded by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, available via <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=5219>.

<sup>2</sup> CIRCLE's exclusive estimate of November's actual turnout by 18-24-year-olds was 48.3%. This was based on the number of actual ballots cast as well as exit poll information and Census data. In the survey released today, 59.9% said they voted and 52.6% said they had voted *and* told us whom they had chosen. That degree of overestimate is very typical for a political survey, and probably reflects a combination of two factors: voters are more likely to participate in surveys than non-voters, and some people claim they voted when they did not. Thus the results of this study should be treated as modestly skewed toward voters.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, "What Voters Know About Campaign 2012" (August 10, 2012), via <http://www.people-press.org/2012/08/10/what-voters-know-about-campaign-2012/?src=iq-quiz>

<sup>4</sup> CNN/Opinion Research Survey, March 11-13, 2011, via <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/01/cnnopinion-research-poll-march-11-13-federal-budget/>

<sup>5</sup> The American National Election Study, "Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior" via [http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab2b\\_5.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab2b_5.htm)

<sup>6</sup> All group differences are statistically different at  $p < .05$  level. Differences are significant at  $>.001$  level for all composites except for HS democratic climate.

<sup>7</sup> The Pearson correlation coefficient for this association is .24, suggesting a significant but weak to moderate correlation.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2009 High School Transcript Study (HSTS).

<sup>9</sup> See the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools in partnership with the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, the National Conference on Citizenship, CIRCLE, and the American Bar Association Division for Public Education, *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (2003) via [www.civicmissionofschools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org)