



## CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on  
Civic Learning & Engagement

# How Young People Express Their Political Views

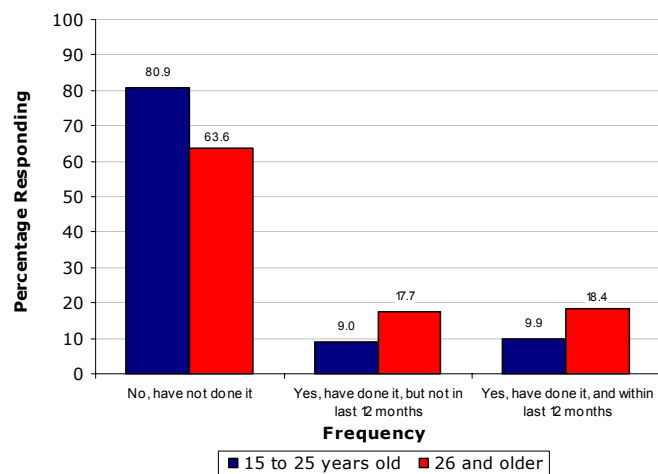
By Michael Olander, Research Assistant<sup>1</sup>  
July, 2003

In September 2002 CIRCLE released a study entitled "*The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*."<sup>2</sup> This fact sheet uses data from a survey that informed that study and illustrates the different ways in which Americans express their views on civic and political issues.<sup>3</sup> Few Americans, and especially few young Americans, participate in activities that may have traditionally been associated with civic engagement. Large majorities of young and older Americans, for instance, have never contacted an elected official or written a letter to the editor of a newspaper. But when asked about non-traditional measures of civic engagement, Americans – especially young Americans – give indications of being quite civically active. Not surprisingly, these measures tend to be expressions of civic engagement that intersect with Americans' day-to-day lives. Americans are especially willing to use their power as consumers to express their opinions of a particular company or product – opinions linked to their civic behavior rather than the qualities of the particular product itself.

■ Graph 1: Contacted or visited a public official

Overall, the frequency of civically motivated activity among both young and older Americans is quite low. Of the civic measures explored by "*The Civic and Political Health of the Nation*," large majorities of Americans have never participated in nine of the eleven different civic activities.

On traditional measures of civic engagement, activities such as writing a letter to a



Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

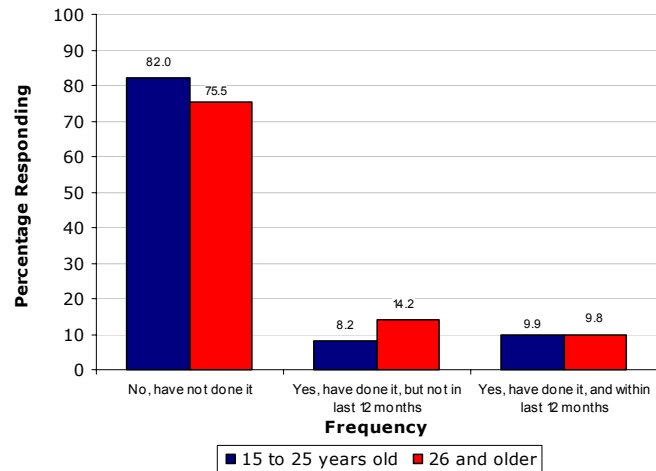
newspaper editor, contacting an elected official, or participating in a protest or demonstration, at least two thirds of those surveyed indicated they have never undertaken such activities.

Young Americans are even less likely to have participated in these traditional methods of civic engagement. Whereas 80.9 percent of young Americans have never contacted a public official, only 63.6 percent of those over age 25 say the same. While 82 percent of American youth say they have never contacted a newspaper or magazine, 75.5 percent of older Americans say likewise. And where 84.4 percent of youth say they have never taken part in a protest, march or demonstration, a slightly smaller percentage of their older peers, 82.5 percent, agree. (See Graphs 1-3.)

In fact, on only two measures – “helping to raise money for a charitable cause” and “not buying something because of conditions under which the product is made” – are there more respondents who say they *have* done it (59.5 percent overall for boycotting and 55.1 percent overall for raising money) than say they *have not* done it. (See Graphs 4 & 7.)

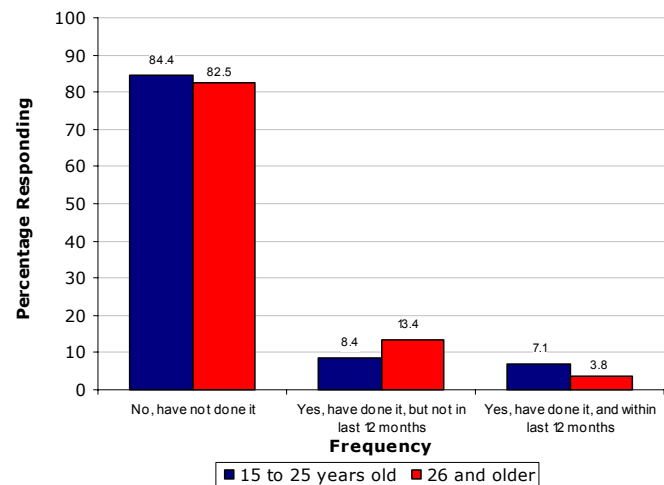
Yet while Americans in general, and young Americans in particular, seem uninterested in many civic-minded activities, there is evidence that Americans, especially among youth, are interested in flexing their civic muscles in ways that stretch the traditional conception of “civic engagement.” Young Americans appear to be more interested in making their voices heard on civic matters by undertaking activities pertinent to their day-to-day lives. When asked if they had ever “not bought something because of the conditions under which it was made,” 52.2 percent of young Americans said “yes” (with the

■ Graph 2: Contacted newspaper or magazine



Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

■ Graph 3: Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration



Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

majority saying they had done so in the last year). This figure is comparable to the number of older Americans who answered “yes” to the same question – 54.7 percent. (See Graph 4.)

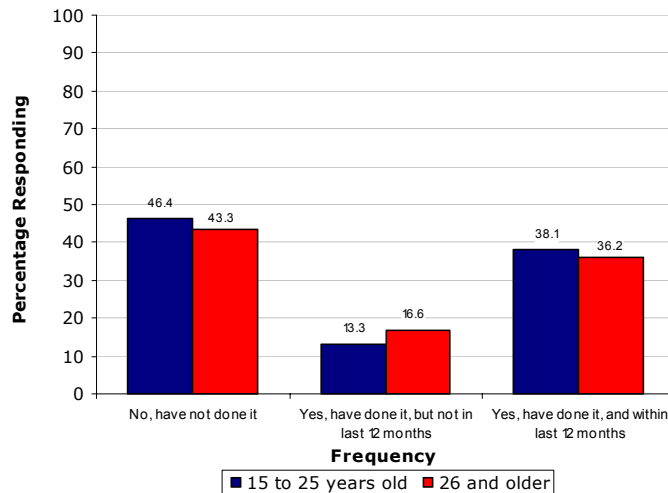
Similarly, 44.6 percent of young Americans said they *had* bought a certain product because they liked the values of the company that made it. Again, this is similar to the percentage of adults who answer “yes” in this case, 46.7 percent. As with boycotting, this

appears to be a regular practice – large majorities of both young and older Americans said they had done this within the last year. In both instances, the proportion of those who say “yes” is much higher than the percentage of Americans who say they have contacted an elected official or written to a publication. (See Graph 5.)

Americans seem more willing to actively support a cause rather than to actively complain about or condemn a particular issue. When asked if they had “personally walked, ran or bicycled for a charitable cause” 40.8 percent of young Americans and 38.2 percent of Americans over 25 said they had. This figure clearly illustrates that time constraints are not necessarily preventing Americans – especially young Americans – from being civically engaged. Young Americans were roughly twice as likely to say they had taken the relatively extensive time and effort to run, walk or cycle for a cause than they were to have sat down at their desk to write a simple letter to the editor.

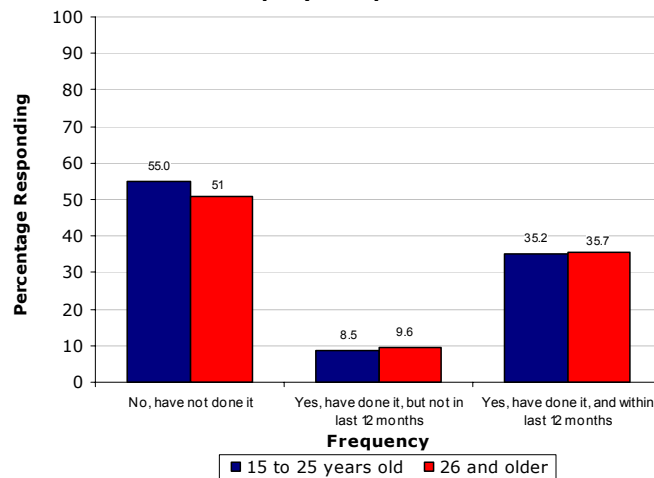
Perhaps the difference here is efficacy – mass activities such as the “Race For The Cure” or the “AIDS Ride” place participants in large groups of like-minded people where participants can “see” themselves making a difference.

**Graph 4: NOT bought something because of conditions under which the product is made**



Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

**Graph 5: Bought a certain product because you like the values of the company that produces it**



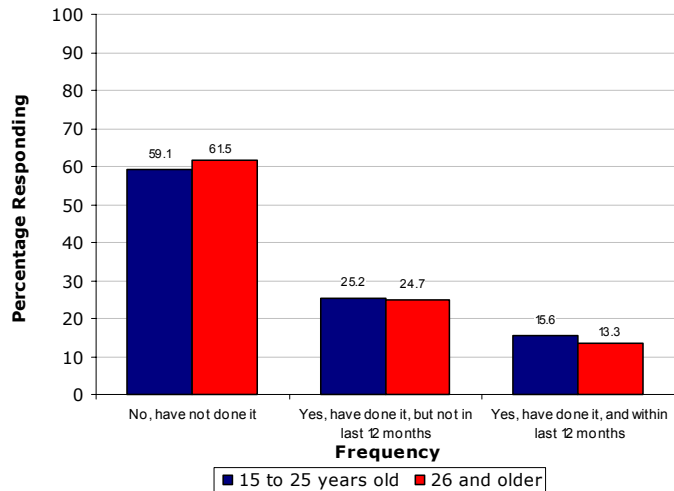
Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

Contrast this with the decision to undertake the ephemeral process of writing a letter to a newspaper that few might read (the survey also found that only about 30 percent of young Americans read a newspaper more than four days per week<sup>4</sup>) and it is easy to see why people might choose the former method of civic engagement. (See Graph 6.)

A second pattern is that the number of young Americans that have helped raise money for a charitable cause is roughly the same as that of older Americans. Just over half of all young Americans (50.7 percent) said they have helped raise money for a charitable cause, only slightly less than 56.4 percent of older Americans who had helped raise funds for charity. This figure likely incorporates the activities discussed above – many walks and rides serve to raise money as well as awareness – yet it may surprise many to see young Americans so involved in fundraising, if for no other reason than they tend to have less disposable income than older Americans. But again this may demonstrate a preference for “hands-on” activism in non-traditional civic fora. (See Graph 7.)

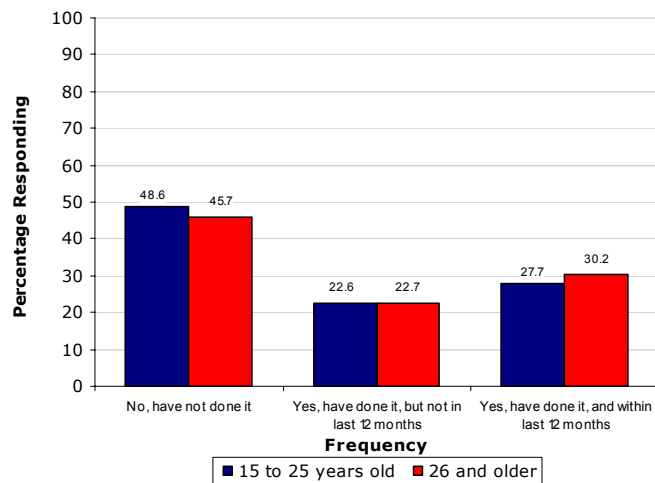
In contrast, younger Americans appear to be disaffected with traditional electoral politics. Only 6.6 percent of young Americans said they had ever “gone door to door for a political or social group or candidate.” More than twice as many older Americans – 14.1 percent – said the same. Some of this difference can be attributed to the fact that a large proportion of those aged 15 to 25 cannot vote. (See Graph 8.) But the experience of canvassing a neighborhood appears to be a relic of another political age, and perhaps a poor measure of how much Americans – both young and old – pay attention to civic issues. As such, it may not be an

■ Graph 6: Personally walked, ran, or bicycled for a charitable cause



Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

■ Graph 7: Done anything else to help raise money for a charitable cause

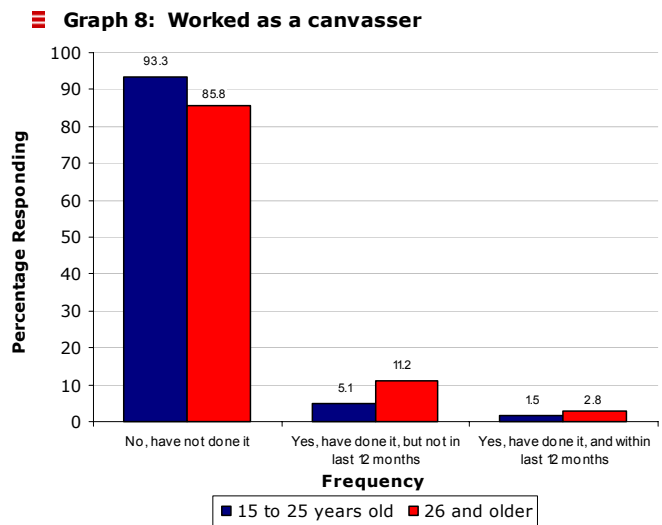


Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

effective way to gauge how civically engaged young Americans may truly be. Young Americans clearly express a preference for civic activities that are supportive and consensual – they appear to prefer to march or ride *for* something than they do protest *against* something.

A last facet of the survey illustrates an interesting trend among young people. On a number of the eleven activities by which respondents could make their civic voices heard, a significant proportion of those who have undertaken that activity have done so in the last twelve months. Since the survey did not ask about the frequency at which respondents had participated in such activities, this fact could represent one or both of the following scenarios:

- Respondents who do make their civic voices heard do it repeatedly. They represent the “hard core” of civically engaged citizens upon whom a disproportionate amount of civic life relies on.
- A second, and possibly more intriguing possibility, is that the events of the year or so prior to the fielding of the survey – the last half of 2001 and the first half of 2002 – had an effect on the civic engagement of many Americans. It is possible that the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan – preceded by a bitterly contested Presidential election, the crash of the internet economy, and strident debates over international trade and globalization have sparked many Americans’ nascent civic sensibilities.



Source: *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, September 2002.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Mark Hugo Lopez, Carrie Donovan, and Emily Hoban Kirby of CIRCLE for helpful comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are my own.

<sup>2</sup> The survey and report was authored by Scott Keeter of the Pew Center for the People & the Press and George Mason University, Cliff Zukin of Rutgers University, Molly Andolina of DePaul University, and Krista Jenkins of Rutgers University.

<sup>3</sup> Respondents were read the following question: "Now I'm going to read you a quick list of things that some people have done to express their views. For each one I read, please just tell me whether you have ever done it or not." (FOR EACH 'YES,' ASK: "And have you done this in the last 12 months, or not?")

<sup>4</sup> See CIRCLE Fact Sheet "*Media Use Among Young People.*"