

Civics Lessons

Youth and the future of democracy

By Nicholas Zill

The terrorist attacks that began on September 11, 2001 made it obvious that the open society and democratic form of government we enjoy in the United States are facing serious challenge. The American public has responded to them with an upsurge of patriotic displays and an increased sense of national unity and purpose. Polls indicate that overwhelming majorities support the military actions the Bush administration has undertaken against terrorist organizations and the nations that harbor them.

In the longer run, however, preserving and perpetuating the American form of government does not only entail defending our country against “enemies foreign and domestic.” It also involves transmitting democratic beliefs and values to the young people who will be the American citizens of the future. This is an appropriate time to ask ourselves how good a job we have been doing at nurturing democratic attitudes and behavior patterns in our children and youth.

Indicators of the civic development of American youth may be found in the results of national surveys of adolescents and young adults. Some of these surveys provide time-series data that go back over the last quarter-century, while others are thus far available for only single points in time.

The indicators include items or scales on how young people view the American

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political system and the efficacy of political actions, what they think it means to be a good citizen, how much they know about the people and institutions that make up our government, how much attention they pay to current events, how willing they are to tolerate opinions different from their own, and what they have done or plan to do in the way of community service or political participation.

Since 1975, the National Institute on Drug Abuse has sponsored an annual national survey of American high school students. Conducted by the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan in the spring of each year, the Monitoring the Future survey has questioned representative samples of 2,200 to 3,300 twelfth graders on their behaviors and their views. The results have shown successive cohorts of young people displaying less and less pride in the American system of government, and more and

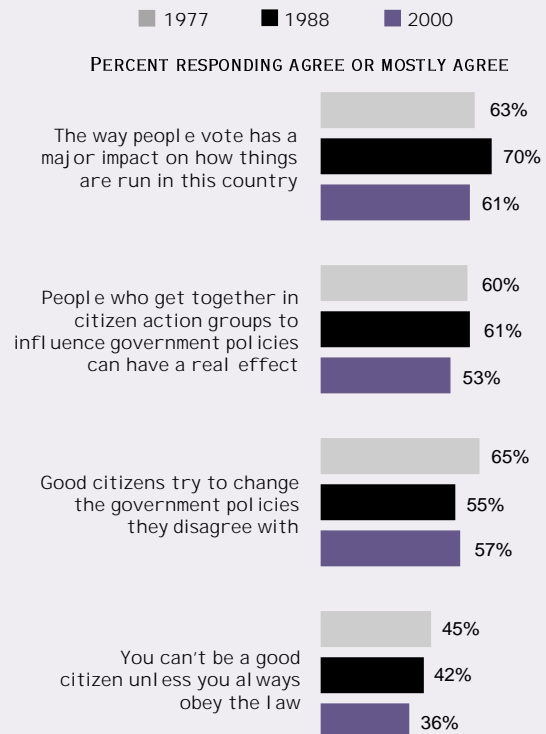
more cynicism about how our national government operates.

Winston Churchill once observed that, “Democracy is the worst system devised by the wit of man, except for all the others.” The high school seniors in Monitoring the Future have yearly been

Figure 1
Youth Views on Citizenship

Question:

How much do you agree or disagree with each statement below?



Note: Asked of high school seniors.
Source: Surveys by the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, latest that of Spring 2000.

given an opportunity to agree or disagree with a similar statement: "Despite its many faults, our system of doing things is still the best in the world." In 1977, two-thirds agreed or mostly agreed with the statement. By the year 2000, the percentage who thought we have the best system of government was still a majority, but its size had fallen considerably, to 55%.

Over the same time period, the number of respondents saying that most or quite a few of the people running the government are crooked or dishonest

percent of adults said people in government waste a lot of money.

As they have in the past, majorities of young people still believe voting and political action can make a meaningful difference in how things are run, but belief in the efficacy of traditional democratic mechanisms has, for the most part, been diminishing (see Figure 1). In the year 2000, 61% of the students in Monitoring the Future agreed that "The way people vote has a major impact on how things are run in this

These data suggest a fundamental lack of understanding among young Americans that laws do not mean much if obeying them is optional. Nor do youngsters seem to appreciate that having and abiding by laws can maximize everyone's freedom of action.

Good citizenship also requires an informed citizenry, but most high school students are ignorant of basic facts about governmental institutions and current political leaders. The National Household Education Survey (NHES) of 1996,

"The abysmal voting rates of young adults are not favorable reflections on the job families and schools have been doing to inculcate democratic principles and habits in American youth—or on the quality of their own citizenship, for that matter."

conducted by Westat for the National Center of Education Statistics of the US Department of Education, asked a national sample of 4,200 in grades 9 through 12 a short series of

climbed from a 47% minority to a 58% majority. And the proportion believing that one often or almost always can trust the government in Washington to do what is right fell from just under half to a 38% minority.

Meanwhile, majorities of 54% or more felt that a lot or nearly all of tax money is wasted, while 75 to 80% were either dissatisfied or neutral about the way our national government is operating—hardly a ringing endorsement of government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

To a considerable extent, these youthful attitudes about national government reflected the opinions of their elders. For example, in the 1988 National Election Survey (NES), only 40% of adults aged 18 and over said they trusted the government to do what is right most of the time or just about always. In the 2000 NES the figure was 44% for all adults; 41% for adults born 1975 or after. Fifty-nine

percent of adults said people in government waste a lot of money. This was down from 70% in 1988, but about the same as the percentage endorsing the efficacy of voting in 1977. By way of comparison, the 1996 General Social Survey found 72% of adults agreeing that "Elections are a good way of making governments pay attention to what the people think."

Fifty-three percent of the year 2000 high school seniors thought that "People who get together in citizen action groups to influence government policies can have a real effect." Sixty percent or more endorsed the same statement in earlier years.

Most (57%) continued to believe in 2000 that trying to change things one does not like about the government is part of being a good citizen, although this was down from 65% in 1977. But only 36% agreed that one of the hallmarks of good citizenship is always obeying the law, and the size of this minority had diminished from 45%.

political knowledge questions. The questions were not particularly hard or obscure. They concerned such things as the identity of the current vice president or Speaker of the House, what the first ten amendments of the Constitution are called, or which party now has the most members in the US Senate.

The average student achieved a score of 38 out of 100 on the quiz, replying to most questions with a "don't know" or an incorrect answer. Only about 20% got a score of 80 or better, and only 8% got all the answers right. (Their parents did somewhat better, getting an average score of 51 out of 100.)

These results are hardly surprising, given that most students pay scant attention to information about national events in the mass media. Only 41% of respondents to the NHES said they read newspapers or newsmagazines at least once a week, while 40% said they watched or listened to broadcast news daily or almost daily. Just 28% said

they discussed current events with their parents at least once a week. The proportion of high school seniors who said they had read more than five books during the past year, other than those assigned, declined from 37% in 1977 to 20% in 2000.

Those who did any of these things showed more awareness of basic political facts. However, according to the Monitoring the Future surveys, both interest in government and discretionary reading by young people have declined substantially over the last quarter-century.

The most fundamental obligation of citizenship in a democracy is the exercise of the franchise. A large majority of twelfth graders (83%) in the 2000 Monitoring the Future survey intended to fulfill this obligation, saying that they have voted or planned to vote when they came of voting age. However, as with most things, actions speak louder than words.

Post-election surveys conducted by the US Bureau of the Census as supplements to its November Current Population Survey (CPS) in election years show that rates of registration and voting by young adults, typically lower than those of older Americans, have declined still further in recent years.

Whereas 46% of adults over age 24 voted in the congressional elections of 1998, compared to 49% in 1974 and 51% in 1978, only 17% of 18 to 24 year olds voted in 1998, down from the 24% of that age group who voted in both 1974 and 1978. (And it is important to note that a change of even a single percentage point is significant because of the extremely large size of the CPS samples.)

More young adults vote in presidential elections, but these rates have generally been declining as well, and more steeply than those of the over-24 voters. In 1996, 58% of older adults

voted for president, down from the 63% who cast ballots in 1976. Among 18 to 24 year olds, 32% reported voting for president in 1996, compared to 42% in 1976.

Further, only meager minorities of young people could see themselves going beyond this most basic of civic responsibilities by someday engaging in activities like contributing to or working in political campaigns (see Figure 2)—and the small population of would-be activists has been getting sparser over time. For example, the proportion of seniors saying they probably would work in a political campaign plunged from 20% in 1977 to 11% in the year 2000, and those saying they would probably write to public officials dropped from 37% to 26%.

There are some positive trends in young people's civic development. Growing numbers of young Americans have been participating in community service activities (partly because their schools require it). The proportion of twelfth graders who reported taking part in community affairs or volunteer work at least

once or twice a month grew from 24% in 1977 to 32% in 2000.

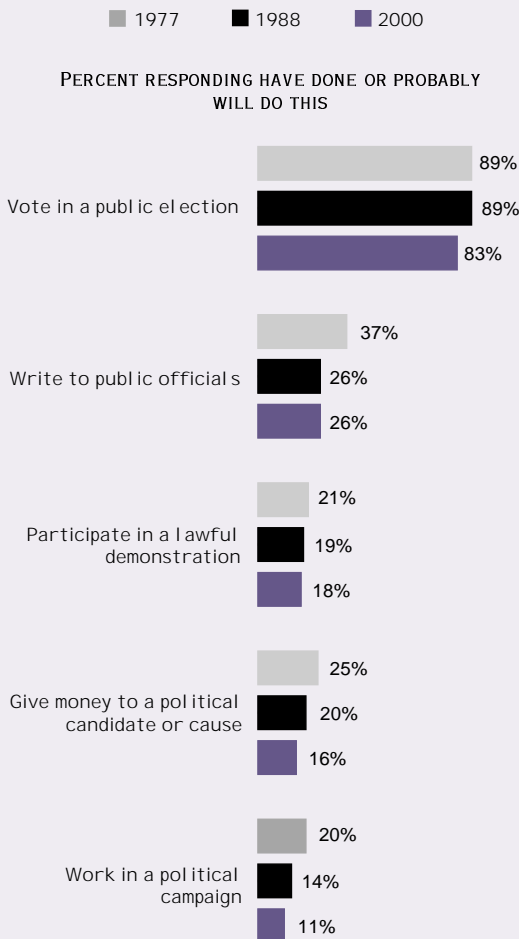
More than half (56%) of eleventh and twelfth graders in the NHES said they had participated in community service at some point during the 1995-96 school year. Nearly a third participated regularly (i.e., more than twice), while another quarter participated at least one or two times. Smaller but substantial numbers (more than 45%) of students in grades 6 through 10 reported engaging in community service.

Figure 2

Planned Participation in Decline

Question:

Have you ever done, or do you plan to do, the following things...?



Note: Asked of high school seniors.
Source: Surveys by the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, latest that of Spring 2000.

Majorities of NHES respondents also demonstrated a sense of engagement with the political process in their belief that their families had a say in how government is run, and their support for people's right to express unpopular or controversial opinions.

The preponderance of the youth survey evidence is not reassuring, however. The low political knowledge levels of high school students and the abysmal voting rates of young adults are not favorable reflections on the job families and schools have been doing to inculcate democratic principles and habits in American youth—or on the quality of their own citizenship, for that matter. Nor do young people's increasingly cynical views of the national government constitute a good report card on the performance of the American political system.

Surveys on the political attitudes, knowledge, and behavior of youth may

government and politics may be a warning sign that our representative democracy is malfunctioning. One need only list the major political scandals of the last 25 years—Watergate and Iran-Contra in the seventies and eighties, and the Whitewater, Monica Lewinsky, and presidential pardon scandals of the Clinton years—to get an idea of why young Americans, like their elders, might well be “turned off” by national politics.

Fortunately, the survey findings also suggest some things that families and schools might do to raise the political awareness and civic participation of young people.

Parents can discuss current events with their daughters or sons and encourage them to read newspapers or newsmagazines regularly. Families can watch or listen to broadcast news together. Parents can encourage their adolescent children to take elective

exercises in how and why laws and societal rules are developed, enacted, and enforced. Schools can also require meaningful, not just token, levels of community service by all students. Again, analyses of the NHES data reveal that these school practices are associated with greater governmental knowledge and an enhanced sense of political efficacy in students.

Restoring young people's pride in national government and reducing youthful cynicism about the operation of the political system are more challenging tasks. The upward spike in public support for the federal government that occurred after the terrorist attacks is likely to be a temporary phenomenon. Likewise, it is impossible to tell whether long-term changes in high school students' interest in learning about politics and public affairs will be brought about by recent events. Lasting increases in both will probably require systemic reforms.

One can only speculate about what changes might make a difference. But reducing the role that big money plays in political campaigns likely would help, as would serious bipartisan efforts to make government more efficient and find solutions to problems such as the fiscal crunch that will occur when the postwar Baby Boom generation reaches retirement age.

It might also help if national political leaders use less negative advertising in their campaigns and stop running for office on platforms that belittle the very governmental institutions they hope to lead. If the partisan altercations and avoidance of thorny issues that have been common in the last quarter-century continue, we may well see future generations of young citizens who are even more alienated from their own national government than the current generation. ●

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be seen as a kind of plebiscite on the operation of our political system. The interest of young people in politics and government and their eagerness to participate in them when they come of age may be taken as a vote of confidence in the system.

This confidence means young people perceive government as functioning reasonably well to achieve worthwhile goals and to serve broad public interests rather than narrow private ones. It means young Americans feel they have a reasonably good chance of changing things and accomplishing useful ends by supporting candidates for public office or engaging in other forms of legitimate political activity.

On the other hand, the indifference or hostility of young people toward

courses on civics and government and have them engage in community service, even if their schools do not require it.

Most importantly, parents can set a good example by following current events themselves, voting regularly, and engaging in other forms of political participation and community service. Analyses of data from the NHES found that all of these parental practices were associated with higher levels of political knowledge and civic participation on the part of students.

Schools, of course, also have a role to play in requiring their students to take courses in which essential facts about national government are taught, current events are discussed, and students get experience through simulation ex-