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Civic Learning & Engagement

Television Consumption and Civic Engagement Among 15 to 25 Year Olds

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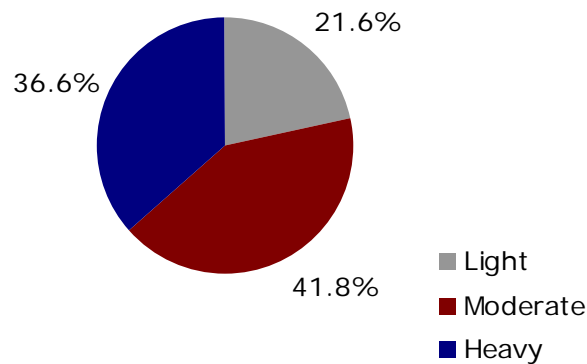
Daily television viewing has become commonplace amongst American youth. In fact, the United States “takes the couch-potato crown,” leading the world in having household televisions operating at an average of over eight hours per day.² However, according to Reed Larson of the University of Illinois, “Research indicates that TV is rarely used for positive developmental experiences and that viewing is associated with developmental liabilities.”³ Furthermore, some have noted that excessive television consumption (usually defined as more than four hours a day) is associated with obesity, transformed sexual norms, lower grades,⁴ and negative effects in reading performance⁵. Others report that increasing amounts of television consumption negatively influences sleeping patterns, frequency and quality of family meals, and self image.⁶

There are also negative correlations between television watching and civic engagement. In this fact sheet, I present new evidence from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (2006 CPHS) on the correlation between a wide range of civic engagement indicators and daily television consumption among American young people. The 2006 CPHS was conducted between April and June of 2006, involving interviews of 1,700 young people (15-25 years old) and 550 adults (age 26 and older).⁷ For the purpose of this fact sheet, I define three mutually exclusive groups based on the amount of television viewed on a daily basis:

1. **Heavy Television Consumption.** Individuals who report watching four or more hours of television per day.
2. **Moderate Television Consumption.** Individuals who report watching at least two, but less than four hours of television per day.
3. **Light Television Consumption.** Individuals who report watching less than two hours of television per day.

According to the 2006 CPHS, approximately 21.6 percent of American young people can be classified as light television consumers, watching less than two hours of television per day; 41.8 percent of can be categorized as moderate television consumers, watching between two and four hours of television per day; and finally, 36.6 percent of American youth can be classified as heavy television consumers, spending at least four hours a day in front of their television sets.

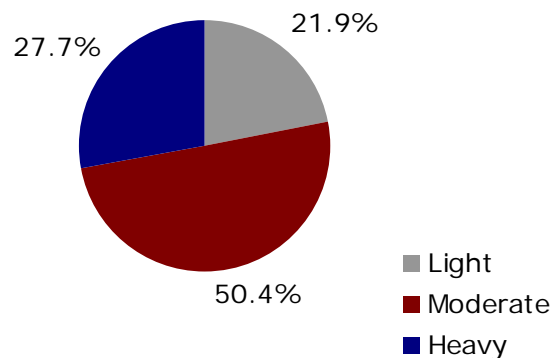
Figure 1: Television Consumption per Day Among 15-25 Year Olds.



Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

In contrast, American adults were more likely than their younger counterparts to belong to the "Moderate Television Consumption" category, with 50.4 percent watching between two and four hours of television per day. A similar percentage of adults fell into the light category as youth (21.9 percent compared to 21.6 percent), and a lower percentage of adults belonged to the heavy category (27.7 percent compared to 36.6 percent).

Figure 2: Television Consumption per Day Among Adults

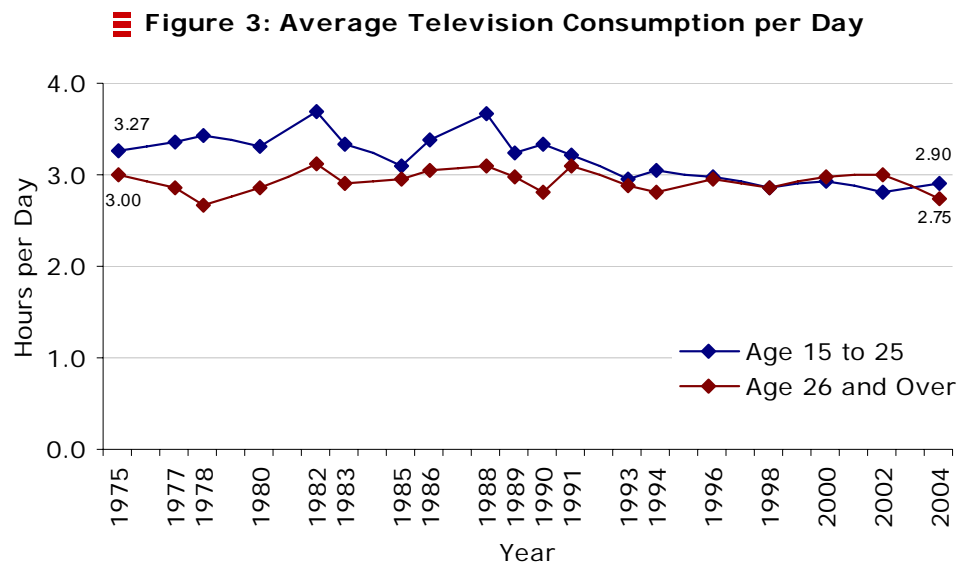


Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Trends in Television Consumption, Hours of TV Watched per Day

Since 1975, the average amount of television watched per day among Americans has hovered around three hours per day. If anything, the average amount of television consumed per day among adults has decreased from a high of 3.1 hours per day in 1982 to 2.8 hours per day in 2004. The trend for youth aged 15 to 25 has shown greater variation, spiking to a high of 3.7 hours per day in 1982 to a low of 2.8 in 2002.

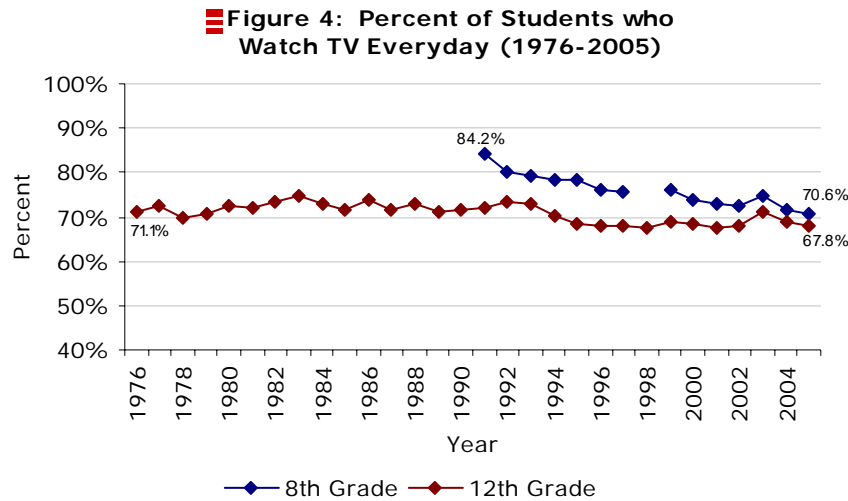
Interestingly enough, the gap between the amount of television that adults and youth (ages 15 to 25) watch has narrowed since the 1970's, with youth and adults posting almost identical average hours of television consumption since the early 1990's. While adults have consistently watched less television than their younger counterparts, adults actually averaged more daily television consumption than their younger counterparts in 2002.



Source: General Social Survey, 1975 to 2004⁸.

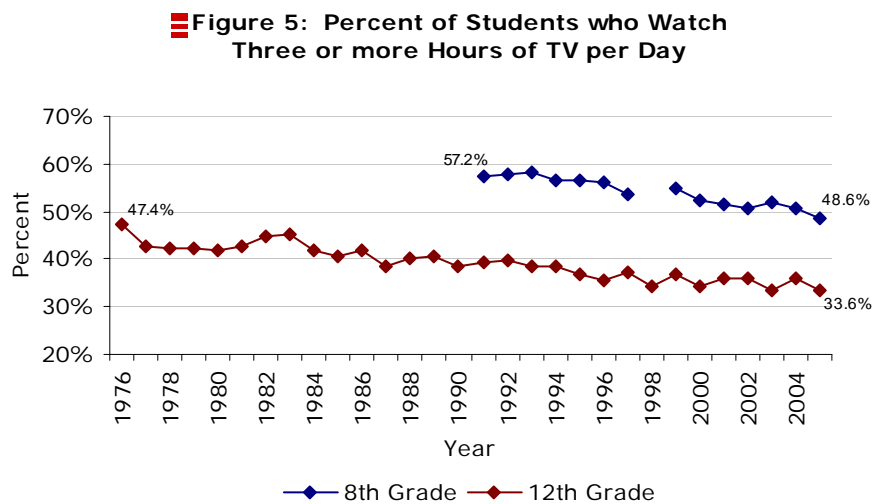
Trends in Television Consumption Among Students

While the average daily amount of television consumed by all fifteen to twenty-five year olds has slightly decreased since 1975, television consuming trends amongst students are also steadily decreasing. The percent of eighth graders reporting to watch television everyday has decreased from 84.2 percent in 1991 to 70.6 percent in 1991. Likewise, the percent of high school seniors reporting to watch television every day decreased from 71.1 percent in 1976 to 67.8 percent in 2005, reaching a high of 74.9 percent in 1983⁹. (See Figure 4.)



Source: Monitoring the Future Survey, 1976 to 2005

The percent of students reporting to watch three or more hours of television per day is also declining among eighth and twelfth grade students. In 1991, 57.2 percent of eighth graders reported watching at least three hours per day; that figure fell to 48.6 percent in 2005. Showing a similar pattern of decline, 47.4 percent of seniors reported watching at least three hours of television per day in 1976, but only 33.6 percent said the same in 2005⁹. (See figure 5).



Source: Monitoring the Future Survey, 1976 to 2005

The 19 Indicators of Civic Engagement

Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, and colleagues, in their book *A New Civic Engagement* and their 2002 report *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation*, developed a civic engagement index composed of the nineteen indicators of civic engagement shown below. They split their nineteen indicators into three broad categories of civic engagement: "civic (or community) activities," "electoral activities," and "political voice activities." The results presented in this fact sheet are organized following this civic engagement index, the nineteen indicators of civic engagement, and the three broad categories of civic engagement.

**Table 1: 19 Core Measures of Civic Engagement from the 2006 CPHS
(Activities Performed within the Last 12 Months)**

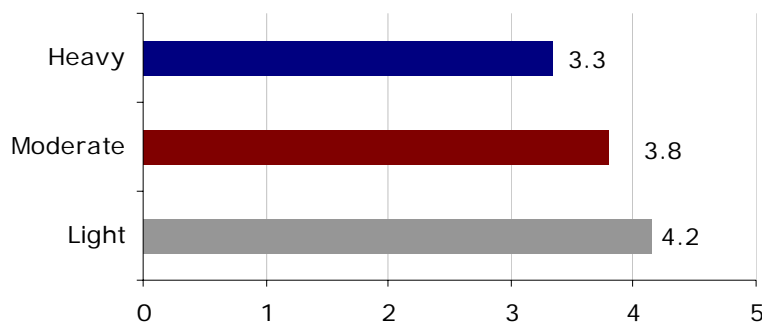
Civic Activities	Electoral Activities	Political Voice Activities
Engaged in Community Problem Solving Activity	Volunteer for Political Candidates or Groups	Contacted a Public Official
Volunteered (any type)	Regular Voter (ages 20 and Older)	Contacted the Print Media
Active Member of at Least one Group	Tried to Persuade Others in an Election	Contacted the Broadcast Media
Ran/Walked/Biked for Charity	Displayed a Campaign Button or Sign	Protested
Raised Money for Charity	Donated Money to a Candidate or Party	Signed an E-mail Petition
		Signed a Paper Petition
		Engaged in Boycotting
		Engaged in Buycotting ¹⁰
		Canvassed

Source: Civic and Political Health of the Nation Report, October 2006.

The Relationship Between Television Consumption and Civic Engagement

Overall, the amount of daily television consumption negatively correlates with civic engagement among American youth aged 15-25¹¹. According to the 2006 CPHS, the average American youth participated in 3.7 of the 19 civic engagement indicators in the last twelve months, and both the “Light Television Consumption” and “Moderate Television Consumption” groups scored higher than the national average by participating in an average of 4.2 and 3.8 activities respectively. Only the “Heavy Television Consumption” group fell below the national average by participating in only 3.3 civic activities. (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: Total Civic Engagement Score By Television Consumption Among 15-25 Year Olds.



Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Although there is a strong correlation between television consumption and overall civic engagement, once civic engagement is broken down into its three categories and nineteen individual indicators, there are some important exceptions. For example, heavy television watchers are more likely to donate to political campaigns, and moderate television watchers are more likely to specialize in electoral activities. These two specific exceptions are noteworthy in the context that television is a major setting of modern political campaigns.

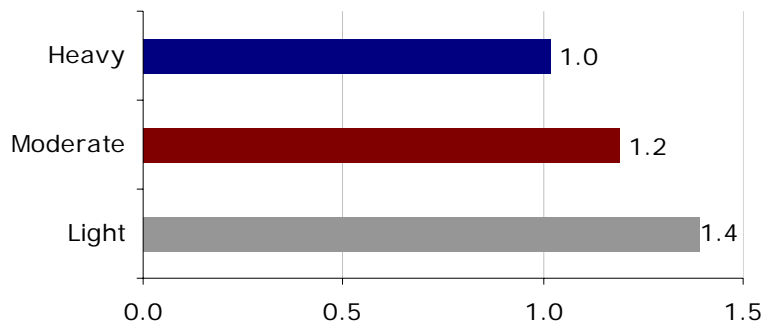
In general, when interpreting these results, one should be cautious not to assume a causal relationship between television consumption and civic engagement. Although it is possible that lower levels of television consumption leave more time for individuals to engage civically, it is also likely that any correlation between television consumption and civic engagement is driven by a common third variable.

However, a statistically significant difference in total civic engagement score does exist. Even when a multivariate analysis that controls for the following variables, the statistically significant difference between the three television consumption groups is not reduced, suggesting a relationship between television consumption and civic engagement: gender, race/ethnicity, mother's educational attainment, region of the country, economic class, whether politics was discussed in the home while the respondent was growing up, and whether a volunteer was present in the home while the respondent was growing up. Therefore, these differences in civic engagement amongst the three television groups are noteworthy.

Civic Activities

With regard to “civic” (or “community”) involvement, young people who watch the least amount of television per day show a higher level of participation compared to their peers who watch more television. Individuals in the “Light Television Consumption” category averaged 1.4 out of the five possible civic indicators included in the civic engagement index, while those in the moderate and heavy categories averaged respectively less with 1.2 and 1.0 civic activities.

Figure 7: Total Number of Civic Activities Score by Television Consumption Among 15-25 Year Olds.

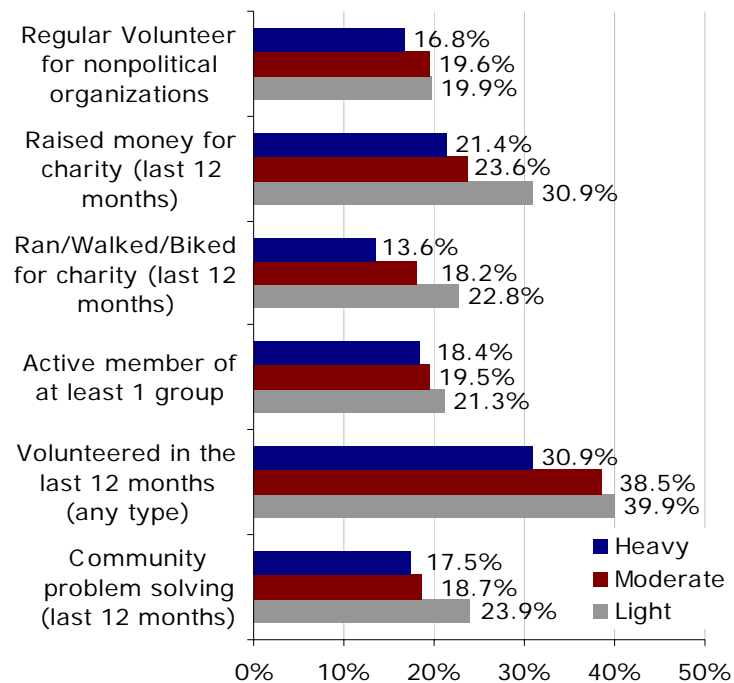


Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Taking a closer look at each of the six civic activity indicators yields a similar, monotonic, pattern of engagement across television viewing categories (See Figure 8.) Young people who watched less than two hours of television per day participated in each of the six civic indicator activities proportionately more than their peers. Most notably, those individuals in the “Light Television Consumption” group were much more likely than their peers to participate in community problem solving (23.9 percent), raise money for charity (30.9 percent), and run/walk/bike for charity (22.8 percent).

However, it is interesting to note that all groups participated in a high rate of volunteering¹². While the same monotonic pattern was evident, with those watching less television more likely to volunteer than those who watch more television, even the “Heavy Television Consumption” group (with the lowest proportion of volunteering) reported volunteering at high rates. In fact, even though the “Heavy Television Consumption” group was least likely to participate in each of the six civic activities, they still volunteered at a higher rate than either other group participated in any of the other civic activities (See Figure 8.) However, when volunteering is expanded to volunteering on a regular basis for nonpolitical organizations, the participation rates fall to similar levels as the other non-volunteering indicators.

Figure 8: Core Indicators of Civic Involvement, By Television Consumption Among 15-25 Year olds. Percent Responding "Yes".

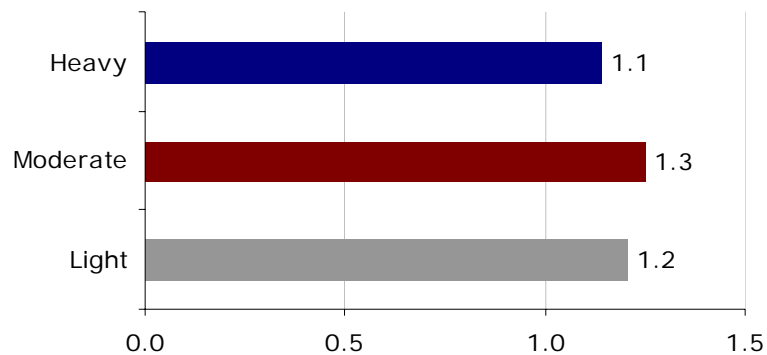


Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Electoral Engagement Activities

Simply examining the average electoral activity participation amongst each of the groups does not provide for any clear correlation between television consumption and electoral civic engagement. Once again, the “Heavy Television Consumption” group averaged the lowest participation in all electoral activities in the last twelve months; however, the “Moderate Television Consumption” group averaged a higher participation than the “Light Television Consumption” Group.

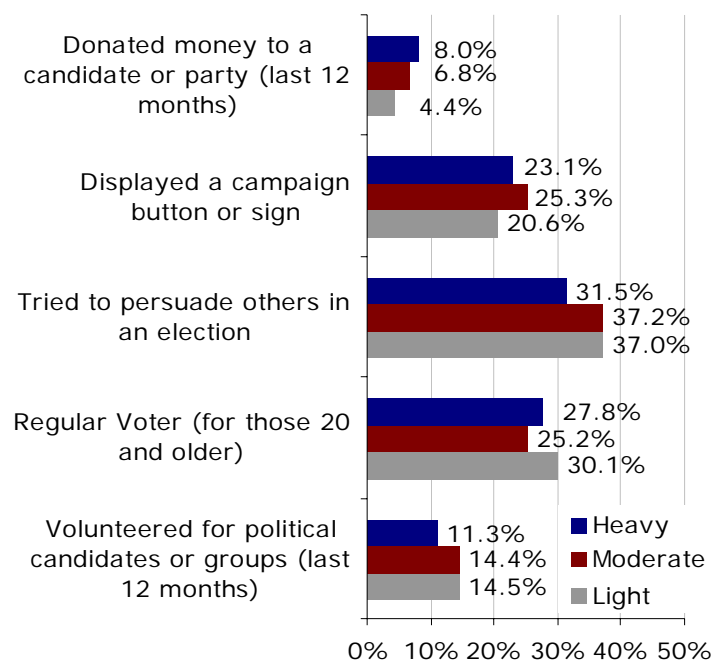
Figure 9: Total Electoral Score By Television Consumption Among 15-25 Year Olds.



Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Closely looking at each of the electoral indicators individually leads to the same muddled conclusions. In fact, it appears that increasing amounts of television consumption are directly correlated with campaign contributions; perhaps this is because those individuals who watch more television are more likely to view political advertisements and are prompted to donate to a campaign. Additionally, the “Heavy Television Consumption” group was more likely than the light group to display a campaign button or sign, but the “Moderate Television Consumption” group was most likely of all. The moderate group also reported the highest rate of trying to persuade others to vote a particular way in an election. The “Light Television Consumption” group was the most likely to vote regularly and to volunteer for political candidates (See Figure 10.)

Figure 10: Core Indicators of Electoral Participation by Television Consumption Among 15-25 Year Olds. Percent Responding "Yes".

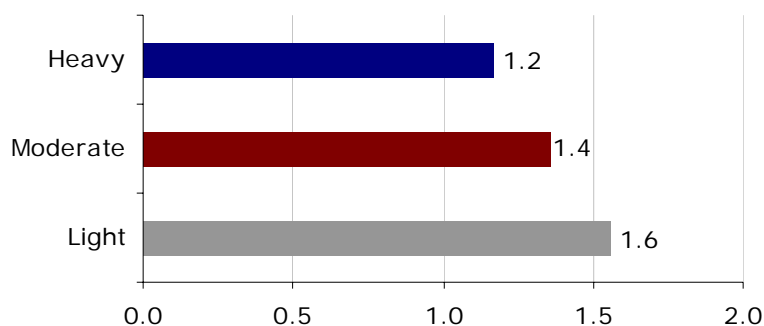


Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Political Voice

The political voice category of civic engagement activities once again showed a monotonic relationship between the amount of television consumption and engagement in political voice activities. The “Light Television Consumption” group participated in an average of 1.6 of the 9 possible political voice activities, while the moderate and heavy groups only averaged participating in 1.4 and 1.2, respectively.

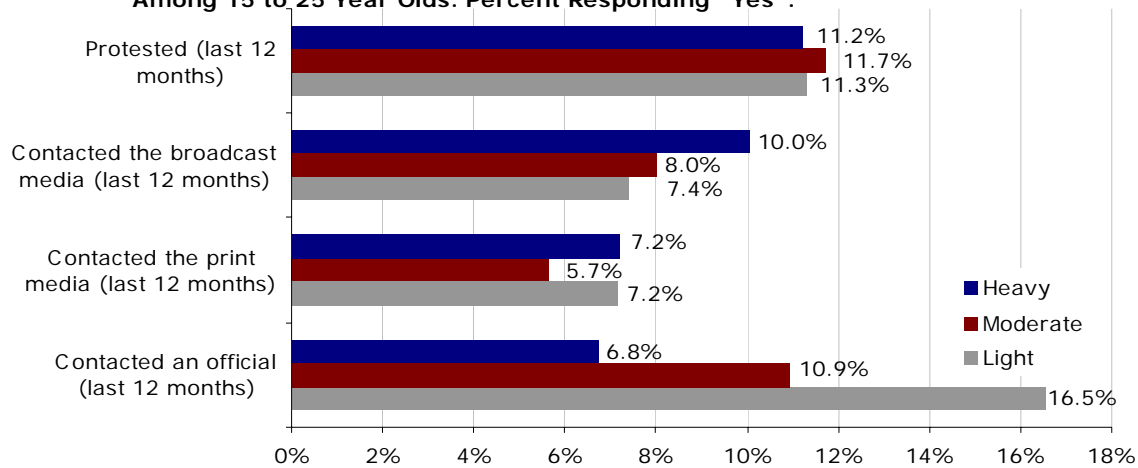
Figure 11: Total Political Voice Score By Television Consumption Among 15-25 Year Olds.



Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

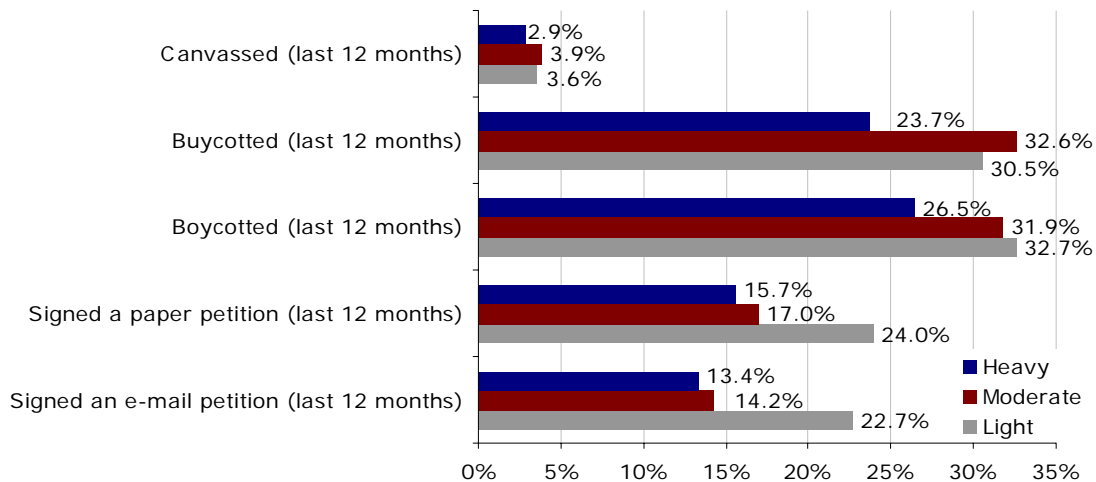
While a negative correlation exists overall between increasing amounts of television consumption and political voice civic engagement, each individual indicator shows mixed results. The “Light Television Consumption” group was most likely to contact a public official (16.5 percent), boycott (32.7 percent), sign a paper petition (24.0 percent), and sign an e-mail petition (22.7 percent). The “Moderate Television Consumption” group was most likely to protest (11.7 percent), canvass (3.9 percent), and boycott¹³ (32.6 percent). Finally, the “Heavy Television Consumption” group was most likely to contact the broadcast media (10.0 percent) and contact the print media (7.2 percent); once again, their increased exposure to television may prompt these individuals to contact the media more regularly than their peers who watch less television. (See Figures 12 and 13.)

Figure 12: Core Indicators of Political Voice By Television Consumption Among 15 to 25 Year Olds. Percent Responding "Yes".



Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Figure 13: Core Indicators of Political Voice By Television Consumption Among 15 to 25 Year Olds. Percent Responding "Yes".



Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

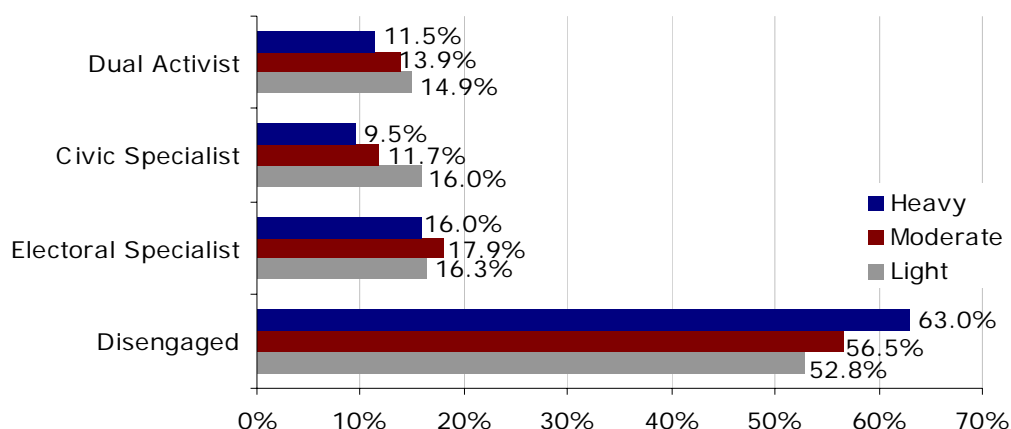
Typology of Engagement

The 2006 *Civic and Political Health of the Nation* report classifies individuals into four “typology of engagement” groups based on their participation in the civic engagement index. Individuals who engage in two or more civic activities are labeled as “civic specialists.” Similarly, individuals who engage in two or more electoral activities are labeled as “electoral specialists.” Individuals who are both civic and electoral specialists are identified as “dual activists.” Finally, individuals who engage in less than 2 civic activities and less than 2 electoral activities are considered “disengaged.”

Individuals who watched less than two hours of television per day were more likely to be classified as dual activists and civic specialists when compared to their peers who watch more television. Corresponding with their higher level of electoral engagement, the “Moderate Television Consumption” group was more likely to be classified as electoral specialists.

While a large proportion of young people from all groups were involved in at least two activities, substantial numbers of young people were disengaged, regardless of their television consumption. Specifically, while heavy television watchers were the most likely to be disengaged (63.0 percent), moderate television watchers and light television watchers were still mostly classified as disengaged (56.5 percent and 52.8 percent, respectively).

Figure 14: Civic Typology By Television Consumption for 15 to 25 Year Olds.



Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Hyper-Engagement and Hyper-Disengagement

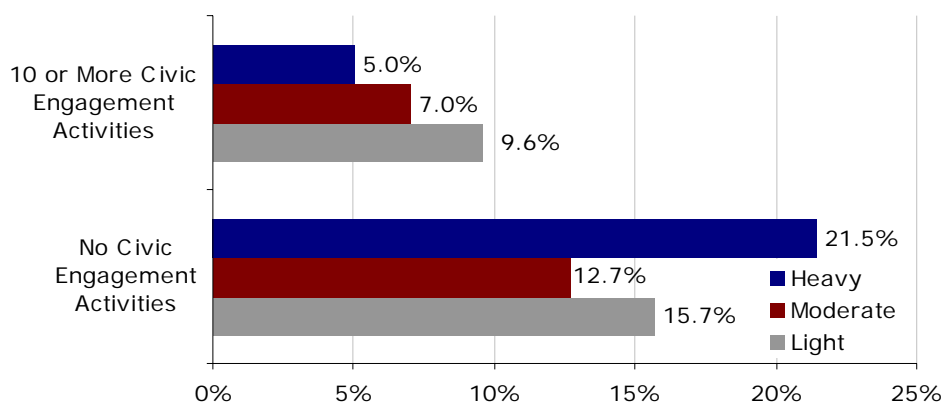
Although the civic typology is a useful tool, it does not take into account political voice activities. As an alternative, Lopez et. al. (2006) have developed two additional summary measures of civic engagement: hyper-engagement and complete disengagement.

Hyper-engaged individuals are those who reported engaging in ten or more of the nineteen possible civic engagement activities. Likewise, completely disengaged individuals were those who reported participating in none of the civic engagement activities.

Hyper-engaged individuals are rare; according to the 2006 CPHS, only seven percent of all youth aged 15-25 qualify as hyper-engaged. Trichotomizing television consumption shows an interesting correlation between hyper-engagement and increasing amounts of television viewing. The “Moderate Television Consumption” group fell right on the national average with 7.0 percent identified as hyper-engaged, the “Light Television Consumption” group was above average with 9.6 percent being hyper-engaged, and the “Heavy Television Consumption” group fell below the national average with only 5.0 percent identified as hyper-engaged.

Unfortunately, completely disengaged individuals are more common; according to the 2006 CPHS, seventeen percent of all youth aged 15-25 qualify as completely disengaged. Both the “Light Television Consumption” and “Moderate Television Consumption” groups fell below the national average with 15.7 percent and 12.7 percent being completely disengaged, respectively, while the “Heavy Television Consumption” group was above the national average, with more than one-fifth of individuals watching four or more hours of television a day being classified as completely disengaged.

Figure 15: Hyper-Engagement and Hyper-Disengagement By Television Consumption for 15-25 Year Olds.



Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS).

Appendix - Table 2: Television Consumption and Civic Engagement Among 15-24 Year Olds (%)

	Hours of Television watched per Day		
	<i>Light</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Heavy</i>
Civic			
Community problem solving (last 12 months)	23.9%	18.7%	17.5%
Volunteered in the last 12 months (any type)	39.9%	38.5%	30.9%
Active member of at least 1 group	21.3%	19.5%	18.4%
Ran/Walked/Biked for charity (last 12 months)	22.8%	18.2%	13.6%
Raised money for charity (last 12 months)	30.9%	23.6%	21.4%
Regular Volunteer for nonpolitical organizations	19.9%	19.6%	16.8%
Electoral			
Volunteered for political candidates or groups (last 12 months)	14.5%	14.4%	11.3%
Regular Voter (for those 20 and older)	30.1%	25.2%	27.8%
Tried to persuade others in an election	37.0%	37.2%	31.5%
Displayed a campaign button or sign	20.6%	25.3%	23.1%
Donated money to a candidate or party (last 12 months)	4.4%	6.8%	8.0%
Political Voice			
Contacted an official (last 12 months)	16.5%	10.9%	6.8%
Contacted the print media (last 12 months)	7.2%	5.7%	7.2%
Contacted the broadcast media (last 12 months)	7.4%	8.0%	10.0%
Protested (last 12 months)	11.3%	11.7%	11.2%
Signed an e-mail petition (last 12 months)	22.7%	14.2%	13.4%
Signed a paper petition (last 12 months)	24.0%	17.0%	15.7%
Boycotted (last 12 months)	32.7%	31.9%	26.5%
Buycotted (last 12 months)	30.5%	32.6%	23.7%
Canvassed (last 12 months)	3.6%	3.9%	2.9%

Source: Author's tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS). All results are weighted to a representative national sample.

Appendix- Table 3: Average Hours of Television Consumption per Day

Year	Ages 15 to 25	Ages 26 and Older
1975	3.3	3.0
1977	3.4	2.9
1978	3.4	2.7
1980	3.3	2.9
1982	3.7	3.1
1983	3.3	2.9
1985	3.1	3.0
1986	3.4	3.1
1988	3.7	3.1
1989	3.2	3.0
1990	3.3	2.8
1991	3.2	3.1
1993	3.0	3.9
1994	3.0	2.8
1996	3.0	3.0
1998	2.9	2.8
2000	2.9	3.0
2002	2.8	3.0
2004	2.9	2.8

Source: General Social Survey, 1974 to 2004

Notes

¹ Special thanks to Peter Levine, Mark Lopez, and Emily Kirby for their assistance and comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet.

² "Couch Potatoes." The Economist 19 July 2007. <<http://www.economist.com>>.

³ Larson, Reed W. "How U.S. Children and Adolescents Spend Time: What It Does (and Doesn't) Tell Us About Their Development." Current Directions in Psychological Science 10 (2001): 160-164.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Neuman, Susap B. "The Displacement Effect: Assessing the Relation Between Television Viewing and Reading Performance." Reading Research Quarterly 23 (1988): 414-440.

⁶ Van den Bulck, Jan. "Is Television Bad for your Health? Behavior and Body Image of the Adolescent 'Couch Potato'." Journal of Youth & Adolescence 29 (2000): 273-288.

⁷ For more information on the 2006 CPHS and its survey methodology, please see the CIRCLE report *The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Detailed Look at How Youth Participate in Politics and Communities* by Mark Hugo Lopez, Peter Levine, Debroah Both, Abby Kiesa, Emily Kirby, and Karlo Marcelo, October 2006.

⁸ General Social Survey (GSS) data is made available by the computer-assisted survey methods program (CSM) at the University of California-Berkeley. It can be accessed at <http://sda.berkeley.edu>. At the time of printing, the 2004 General Social Survey was the most recent available and missing years indicate years the GSS was not conducted or the television consumption question was not asked.

⁹ Figures generated by CIRCLE staff from the Monitoring the Future Survey

¹⁰ According to the *2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation* report, boycotting is defined as "buying a certain product or service because one likes the social or political values of the company that produces it."

¹¹ Note that all values and percentages in this fact sheet and the 2006 CHPS have been weighted to a national representative sample.

¹² For a more detailed analysis of volunteering among youth please see the following CIRCLE fact sheets:

- "How Individuals Begin Volunteering" by Sara E. Helms (2005).
- "Time Spent in Volunteer Activity: 2002 and 2003" by Sara E. Helms (2004)
- "Youth Volunteering in the States: 2002 to 2006" by Sara E. Helms and Karlo B. Marcelo (2007).
- "Volunteering Among Young People" by Mark H. Lopez and Karlo B. Marcelo (2007)

¹³ See footnote number 5.