

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

NEW STUDY FINDS NO BIG GENDER GAP IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**WOMEN LEAD IN VOLUNTEERING BUT LAG IN POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND ATTENTIVENESS**

New CIRCLE research finds that there is no major “gender gap” in civic engagement among today’s young people. According to Dr. Krista Jenkins, the lead researcher, “Across most of the options for participation in public life, the sexes are remarkably similar in both what they choose to do and what they tend to avoid. Although there are some interesting differences—such as rates of voluntarism and political knowledge and attentiveness—gender does not appear to be playing a significant role in shaping civic engagement among youth.”

The research finds that generally women do not enter adulthood with tendencies that make them any less likely to be engaged citizens than men. However, there are some small differences in the development of precursors to civic engagement. For example, women are less aware of news and public affairs than their male counterparts and also know less about politics, government and the political process. On the other hand, young women lead the way in volunteering and are significantly more likely to believe that it is their responsibility, rather than their choice, to get involved to make things better for society.

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The research was conducted by Dr. Krista Jenkins of the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics which is housed at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. The research is based mainly on data from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES), a survey of 1,001 15 to 25 year olds (Dot Netters) and 1,000 26 to 37 year olds (Gen Xers). The survey was conducted in the Spring of 2002.

VOLUNTEERING: A PATH TO POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT FOR WOMEN?

While generally there were no major differences between men and women on most civic engagement measures, there were some variations. In particular, young women outpaced their male counterparts in rates of volunteering. Almost half of all women age 15 to 25 (45%) reported volunteering for at least one type of

non-political organization in the past year, compared to only 36 percent of young men.

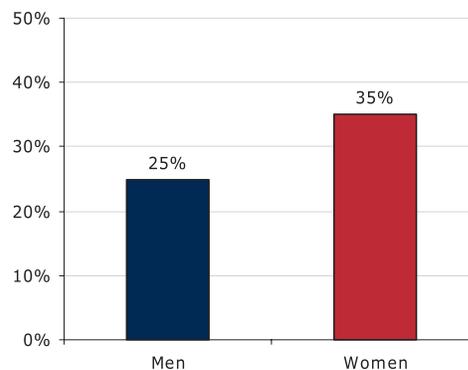
There is some evidence that suggests female volunteers are engaged in more activities that can be classified as political. And, volunteering seems to have some positive spill-over effects into the political arena for young women. According to the author, “To some extent, it appears that volunteering among young women is more consequential for engagement—and in particular electoral engagement—than it is for young men.” One hypothesis is that volunteering may be politicizing young women which, in turn, encourages them to get involved in influencing the political process.

WOMEN LAG BEHIND IN MEASURES OF COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT

The report also found that women lag behind men in their levels of attentiveness to the news and public affairs and in turn their levels of knowledge about politics, government, and political affairs. Other research has identified these measures as important precursors to civic engagement.

According to the report, more than a third of all women between

Graph 1: Cognitive Disengagement Among 15-25 year olds, by Gender



Source: Krista Jenkins, “Gender and Civic Engagement: Secondary Data Analysis.” CIRCLE Working Paper 41, November 2005.

the ages of 15 and 25 (35%) qualify as cognitively disengaged, compared with only a quarter of young men (25%) (See Graph 1).¹ Four in ten young men report regularly reading the newspaper, compared to a third of young women.

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¹ Cognitive engagement was measured by: following politics and government most of the time, engaging in frequent discussions about politics and public affairs with family and friends, and regularly reading the newspaper or watching the nightly news on television.

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NEW STUDY...

Similarly, only 42 percent of young women watch the nightly news on television on a regular basis compared to 49 percent of men.

Dr. Jenkins notes, "Given the trend in attentiveness it is no wonder women also know less about politics, government and the political process."

PREPARING ENGAGED CITIZENS: DIFFERENT TACTICS FOR THE DIFFERENT GENDERS

From the research, it appears that young women and young men are motivated by different experiences. Young women who participate in more family discussions and observe paren-

tal modeling of good behavior are more likely to be civically engaged as they age. For young men, spending fewer hours in front of the television correlates with more active engagement.

In order to encourage more civic engagement among young men and women, it is important to note the different outcomes of early socializing experiences on the different genders. The author concludes, "While today's young men and women are motivated by many of the same precursors to civic engagement, it is equally important to recognize where young women differ and note the ways in which their activism can be encouraged. Young men get a sizeable boost simply by turning off the television. For young women, however, having good role models proves key to encouraging more citizen engagement." ■

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