

# Engaging North Carolina's Generation Z in Civic Life

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## Introduction

Healthy, vibrant communities rely on engaged and informed residents who participate in civic life. Residents who vote in local elections, volunteer at food pantries, and voice their opinions on blogs are working to make our communities better places to live. Looking to the North Carolina of 2020, our state will depend on well-prepared leaders and engaged and informed residents. North Carolina's young people, those born in the early 1990s through the early 2000s, are the future leaders of our state and our communities. In just one decade, we will be relying on members of Generation Z to run for office, volunteer, and participate in the political process. Unfortunately, research suggests that this generation may not be receiving the education and opportunities they need to be effectively prepared to take part in civic life.

## Trends in Youth Civic Engagement

Several recent studies provide a profile of Generation Z's engagement in civic life. Overall, they are less civically engaged than their older counterparts, but their proclivity to use online communities provides an opportunity to improve the generation's social capital.

### North Carolina Civic Health Index

The 2010 *North Carolina Civic Health Index* used data from the U.S. Census 2008 and 2009 Current Population Surveys to assess the strengths and weaknesses of North Carolina's civic life. According to the *North Carolina Civic Health Index*, North Carolina's 16-24 year olds are the least civically engaged of any age group in the state; these findings mirror national trends. While not all of the youth in this study are part of Generation Z, many are on the cusp. If North Carolina's communities do not begin to prioritize civic education and opportunities for youth leadership, the trend of low youth civic engagement is likely to continue.

Healthy democracies and healthy communities rely on residents' informed political participation and community involvement. In 2008, North Carolina's 18-24 year olds were the least likely to vote and the least likely to participate in non-electoral political activities. Fifty-five percent of the state's 18-24 year olds voted in the 2008 election. While youth voter turnout in 2008 was dramatically higher than in years' past, the reality is that 45% of the state's youngest voters chose not to engage in the election. And, the 2008 peak in youth voter turnout did not continue in 2009: youth turnout in the 2009 municipal elections fell back to the low levels of pre-2008 municipal races.

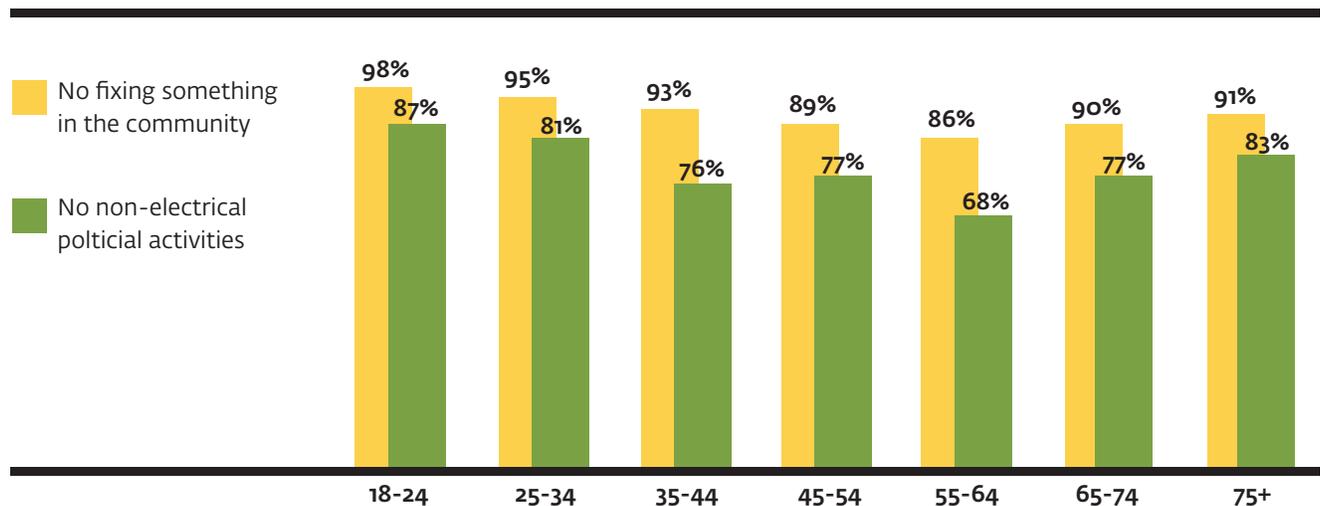
Voting is not the only measure of political participation. Non-electoral political participation is another way in which residents contribute to the civic health of their communities. But, in 2008, nearly 90% of North Carolina's 18-24 year olds chose not to participate in activities such as attending a meeting where political issues were discussed,

buying or boycotting a product or service, taking part in a march, rally, protest or demonstration, or showing support for a candidate or party by donating.

Community involvement is another key measure of civic health. Unfortunately, the state's youngest residents are the least likely to be involved in their communities. In 2009, just 2% of North Carolinians ages 18 to 24 worked with neighbors to fix a problem in the community; this is 6 percentage points below the state rate. Youth in this same age cohort are also the least likely to belong to a group or organization (84% are non-participants compared with the state average of 67%). The chart on the following page, taken from the *North Carolina Civic Health Index*, illustrates the state's community disengagement by age cohort.

## Community Disengagement

Circle Analysis of U.S. Census CPS Data



Residents who understand current issues are a hallmark of healthy communities. Understanding of current issues is often measured by two indicators: keeping up with the news and discussing politics with others. Typically, those who keep up with the news are also civically and politically engaged. However, North Carolina's young people are not faring well on these important measures of civic engagement, as 44.5% of 16-24 year olds neither access news frequently nor discuss politics with others.

## Civic Mission of Schools

The behaviors and skills measured in the *North Carolina Civic Health Index* are not innate: just as we teach young people how to read, write, add, and subtract, we must teach them how to participate in democratic life. As the one venue that has the potential to reach every young person, schools are best poised to prepare Generation Z to be active, engaged community members. This is the historic civic mission of our nation's schools. Unfortunately, our nation's schools are not fulfilling their civic mission. On the 2010 national civics assessment test, only 27% of 4th graders, 22% of 8th graders, and 24% of 12th graders scored proficient or higher in civics. Only 7% of 8th graders could correctly identify the three branches of government and slightly less than half of 8th graders could explain the purpose of the U.S. Bill of Rights. It appears that members of Generation Z are not receiving the foundational knowledge they will need to be engaged, informed members of North Carolina's communities and America's democracy.

## Online Participation: A Pathway to Engagement

Social capital is another important measure of civic health. Residents who are connected to the organizations and individuals in their communities are often more civically engaged. A community's social capital is typically gauged

through two measures: 1) residents' participation in civil society (the formal and informal groups that make our communities work) and 2) residents' interpersonal connections. While North Carolina's young people are not actively participating in civil society, they may be developing important networks that lead to strong interpersonal connections. These interpersonal connections are an important measure of civic engagement because connections to peers, family, and friends have positive effects on health and well-being and may be pathways to civic and political participation.

Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* described America's steady decline in social capital since 1950. Putnam cited increasing numbers of individual bowlers in the face of declining numbers of bowling leagues as one illustration of Americans' shift away from the social networks that often serve as entrees into political and community participation. It appears that young Americans' participation in online interest driven communities, such as those that address politics, social justice, or even pop culture, may be building Generation Z's social capital. Henry Jenkins, an expert in participatory media and society, sees the online participatory cultures popular among young people as the "bowling leagues" of the future: they are providing venues for diverse groups of young people to connect with one another and develop social capital. A recent study of California high school students confirms Jenkins' hypothesis. Study findings, outlined in *Youth Online Activity and Exposure to Diverse Perspectives*, include that online nonpolitical interest-driven communities can provide a valuable form of social capital where diverse perspectives are discussed. The authors recommend the recognition and, in some cases, promotion of these types of online activities as a potential support for youth development.

## **Practical Recommendations**

North Carolina's Generation Z is not participating in civic life at the same levels as older residents, and these young people may not be receiving adequate civic education in school. In addition to improving in-school civic education and out-of-school community involvement opportunities, North Carolina can encourage Generation Z to use digital media as a tool for civic engagement. By taking these simple action steps now, North Carolina will be laying the groundwork for the state's success in 2020.

## **Civic Education**

North Carolina's K-12 schools are uniquely poised to prepare North Carolina's next generation of leaders for participation in civic life. Schools can prepare students to be active, responsible citizens by implementing promising approaches outlined in the 2003 *Civic Mission of Schools* report. These strategies include teaching students how local, state, and national governments work through civics, government, law, and history courses; simulations of town council meetings or General Assembly sessions; discussions about how current events affect residents at the local, state, and national levels; providing opportunities for meaningful student leadership, and service-learning that links students' work outside the classroom to what they are learning from their textbooks.

## **Meaningful Out-of-School Opportunities**

The civic preparation that our schools provide is essential, but it is not enough. Once young people acquire civic knowledge and skills, we must ask them to use it. Sydney Verba's seminal study on civic engagement in American politics noted that the most important predictor of an individual's participation in civic life is whether they were asked to do so. A more recent paper published by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that many young people who exhibit low levels of civic engagement are, in fact, quite motivated to work on civic problems. Specifically, young people from lower social economic status quartiles are more likely to think that being active citizens, supporting environmental causes, or correcting inequalities in society are "very important." CIRCLE scholars suggest that a lack of opportunities leads to lower civic engagement, not necessarily a lack of motivation. As such, it is possible that simply providing youth with meaningful opportunities to be part of community organizations and practice their civic skills will: 1) increase levels of youth civic engagement and 2) prepare more young people for their role as the future leaders of our communities. Examples of such opportunities

include leadership programs offered by local chambers of commerce, local governments, or groups like 4-H and the Boys and Girls Club; local government youth councils; and youth participation on non-profit boards.

## **Build on Youth Interest in Digital Media and Online Life**

Ellen Middaugh and Joseph Kahne hypothesize that digital media will increasingly “become key to many aspects of civic and political life including how people get news and information on issues, how funds are raised for candidates, where and how perspectives on issues and candidates are communicated and shared, and how people are mobilized for some kinds of issues and political campaigns”. If this is the case, then Generation Z is uniquely poised to flourish in this environment. Members of Generation Z have grown up with technology, and have used technology to develop meaningful social connections. Youth should not be discouraged from using technology. They should be encouraged to use it properly: to build connections, to work with people with whom they would not normally be able to work, to improve their communities, and to have their voices heard. Encouraging youth to use technology for civic engagement is one way to prepare them for future participation in civic and political life.