

PRRI/Atlantic Poll: Only One in Three Young People Say They're Certain to Vote 10/11/18

Poll finds young women are more likely to be civically engaged, and political and civic participation by African Americans has eroded in the past two years.

A new PRRI/The Atlantic survey on civic engagement finds stark gaps between young and older Americans' attitudes towards the utility of voting and other methods of civic engagement. The survey, the second in a series of reports assessing challenges to America's democratic institutions and practices from PRRI and The Atlantic, shows little evidence that younger Americans will turnout at historic rates in the upcoming midterms.

Just 35 percent of young Americans (ages 18-29), compared to 81 percent of seniors (ages 65 and older) and 55 percent of all Americans, say they are absolutely certain to vote in the November midterm elections. Young Americans are also significantly less likely than seniors to say that all their friends are certain to vote (7 percent vs. 18 percent).

An outlier to these findings are young women, who emerged from the survey as a group both more fearful for the state of the country and more energized about voting and being civically engaged. Young women are more likely than any other group to report feeling fearful. And while the poll identified low levels of civic engagement across the board, young women are twice as likely as young men to report high civic engagement (24 percent vs. 12 percent).

The Trump Era Is Eroding Black Civics

As The Atlantic's Vann Newkirk reports, the poll finds that black political and civic participation has been especially damaged in the past two years of the Trump administration. He writes: "Thirty-seven percent of black people and 34 percent of Hispanic people report that over the last two years they've become less active in civics or politics, as opposed to 28 percent of whites. Fifty-seven percent of black respondents over the past two years said that over the past two years they've been less likely to run for office." And while black respondents reported that they'd actually been more involved in local activism and organizing than white respondents previously—this level dropped off in the past year.

The Link between Civic Engagement and Social Change

This lack of enthusiasm may be connected to cynicism about the efficacy of voting. Young Americans are significantly less likely than seniors to say voting regularly in elections is the most effective way to create change (50 percent vs. 78 percent).

Young Americans instead are more likely than seniors to believe other forms of civic engagement, such as volunteering for a group or cause (19 percent vs. 4 percent) or being active online (9 percent vs. 1 percent), are the best way to create change.

Feelings about the State of Country

When asked about how they feel about the state of the country today, nearly seven in ten Americans report feeling negative emotions like sadness (29 percent), anger (20 percent), or fear (20 percent). Notably, young women are more likely than any other group to report feeling fearful. Twenty-eight percent of young women, compared to just 18 percent of young men,

report feeling afraid about the state of the country. Young men are more likely than young women to say they feel hopeful (20 percent vs. 13 percent) or content (12 percent vs. 6 percent).

Low Levels of Civic Engagement, Activism among America's Young People

Despite a number of large, high-profile marches and contentious national political and policy debates, about half (48 percent) of Americans say their civic and political engagement has not changed over the past two years. Only one in five (20 percent) Americans say they have become more likely to engage in civic or political activities over the past two years, while 30 percent say they have become less likely to engage. Notably, there are no significant differences between young people and seniors.

Relatively few Americans report engaging in a variety of civic and political actions—either in person or online—in the past year:

- Signing an online petition (28 percent)
- Avoiding buying something or purposefully buying something in order to register a protest or send a message (25 percent)
- Liking or following a campaign or organization online (22 percent)
- Contacting an elected official (19 percent)
- Volunteering for a group or cause (14 percent)
- Attending a community meeting such as school board or city council (12 percent)
- Attending a public rally or demonstration (8 percent)

In an effort to provide a more complete picture of Americans' civic and political engagement, we developed the Civic and Political Engagement Scale, which categorizes individuals based on how many of these activities they engaged in during the prior 12 months. Young people are slightly less likely than seniors to report high levels of civic and political engagement (18 vs. 23 percent). However, young women are an exception to this pattern. Young women are more likely than young men to report high civic engagement (24 percent vs. 12 percent).

Methodology:

The 2018 Civic Engagement Survey was conducted by PRRI in partnership with The Atlantic among a random sample of adults (age 18 and up) living in the United States and who are part of GfK's Knowledge Panel. The survey included a national sample (N=1,011) representing all 50 states, in addition to an over-sample of Americans ages 18-29 (800), totaling to N=1,811. The survey also over-sampled those living in Ohio (507), Illinois (499), Michigan (474), Wisconsin (435), and Minnesota (422). Interviews were conducted online in both English and Spanish between August 24 and September 13, 2018. The survey was made possible by generous grants from The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and The McKnight Foundation.

The margin of error for the national survey is +/- 3.0 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. The design effect for the survey is 1.7.

Complete survey results at www.PRRI.org