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Citizenship Development and the American College Student[1]

Linda J. Sax

Introduction

The development of citizenship among college students is a long-standing goal of higher education in the United States (Boyer and Hechinger, 1981; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont and Stephens, 2003; Finkelstein, 1988; Ketcham, 1992; Morse, 1989; Newell and Davis, 1988). More than two hundred years ago, education for citizenship was seen as essential to the development of a well-informed and critically thinking society (Morse, 1989). Although civic education was somewhat de-emphasized during the industrialization and educational specialization of the nineteenth century, citizenship reappeared as a priority of higher education through the general education movement of the early twentieth century. Indeed, for many years general education was seen as a means of safeguarding civic education from curriculum overspecialization.

By the mid 1980s, however, many educators sensed that higher education was not effectively meeting the challenge of nurturing students' sense of civic responsibility. As noted in a Carnegie Foundation report, "If there is a crisis in education in the United States today, it is less that test scores

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have declined than it is that we have failed to provide the education for citizenship that is still the most important responsibility of the nation's schools and colleges" (Newman, 1985, p. 31).

Since that time, and in particular over the last decade, many colleges and universities have devoted considerable energy into reevaluating their civic functions (Colby, et al., 2003; Ehrlich, 2000). As evidence, we have witnessed a widespread increase in the number of colleges and universities offering courses focused on "service-learning," "problem-based learning," and "community-based learning," curricular strategies designed to promote students' understanding of and commitment to local, national, and global communities (Colby, et al., 2003). In addition, membership in the Campus Compact—a coalition of colleges and universities committed to promoting student citizenship through participation in service—has grown to over 900 institutions since its inception in 1985.

This chapter reports on what national surveys of college students reveal about their civic values and behaviors. How does the commitment to civic life among today's college students differ from students in the past? How does students' sense of civic responsibility change during the college years? How can colleges best prepare students for lives as caring and involved citizens?

These questions are examined through the use of data on college students collected by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), University of California Los Angeles. Established at the American Council on Education in 1966, the CIRP is the nation's largest and oldest empirical study of American higher education, involving data on more than 11 million college students at over 1,800 colleges and universities.

Student trends are examined primarily through responses to the Freshman Survey, the CIRP's annual nationwide survey of incoming college students.

The Freshman Survey, completed each year by over 300,000 first-year students at over 600 colleges and universities nationwide, collects data on the background characteristics, attitudes, values, educational achievements, and future goals of students entering colleges and universities in the United States.

Changes in students' civic values and behaviors are examined through longitudinal data collected on college students at three time-points over a nine-year period. Specifically, the sample includes 12,376 students from 209 four-year colleges and universities who completed the CIRP Freshman Survey in 1985 and were followed-up four and nine years after college entry (in 1989 and 1994). The 1989 follow-up survey includes information on students' college experiences, their perceptions of college, as well as post-tests of many of the items that appeared on the 1985 freshman survey. The 1994 follow-up survey provides information on graduate school and early career experiences, involvement in community service/volunteerism, as well as post-test data on many of the attitudinal and behavioral items appearing on the 1985 and 1989 surveys. It is important to note that these data reflect the experiences of students who attended college in the 1980s, before higher education refocused its attention on preparing students for civic life. HERI is currently engaged in new post-college follow-up of students who attended college in the 1990s. When available, these new data will enable us to assess the extent to which college's role in promoting civic engagement has changed as this movement has gained momentum in higher education.

Freshman trends

This section addresses how college students today compare with students in the past with respect to two aspects of civic responsibility: (1) involvement in volunteerism and community service, and (2) interest in politics.

Volunteerism and community service

Data from the Freshman Survey show that volunteerism has been on the rise over the past decade, with a record high 82.6 percent of college freshmen in 2002 performing volunteer work during their last year in high school (see Figure 1). For many students, volunteering represents more than just a token day at a soup kitchen or a brief visit to a children's hospital. In fact, a full 70.2 percent students who volunteer do so on a weekly basis (Sax, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney, 2002).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Several factors have contributed to the rise in volunteerism reported by incoming college students. First is the increasing number of service programs supported by federal and state governments (Kahne and Westheimer, 1996; Keith, 1994; Levine,1994; O'Brien, 1993). Legislation such as the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and President Clinton's National Service Trust Act 1993, as well as numerous city and statewide initiatives around the country, have helped to connect more students with service opportunities in the community (Fiske, 2002).

Second is the increasing number of service learning opportunities available at the elementary and secondary levels (Eberly, 1993; Fiske, 2002). An outgrowth of experiential education, service learning is a pedagogical tool that uses community or public service to enhance the meaning of traditional course content. Its connection with specific courses is what distinguishes service learning from other forms of volunteer work. Research has in fact documented that, at least among college students, course-based service has a stronger effect on promoting students' sense of civic responsibility than does service conducted independently or through the co-curriculum (Astin and Sax, 1998; Vogelgesang and Astin, 2000).

A third factor promoting student involvement in community service is the growing number of high schools requiring community service for graduation

(Eberly, 1993; Fiske, 2002; Keith 1994). Indeed, many skeptics assume that the rise in student volunteerism is due primarily to such requirements. However, the fact is that only one in four students who volunteered during their last year in high school attended schools that required community service for graduation (Sax, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney, 2002). It appears, therefore, that the majority of students who engage in volunteer work do so of their own volition.

Interest in politics

Despite young people's growing interest in volunteerism and community service, their interest in politics has shown dramatic declines over the past thirty-seven years. For example, the percent of incoming college students who feel that it is important for them to keep up to date with political affairs dropped from 57.8 percent in 1966 to 32.9 percent in 2002 (see Figure 2). Similarly, only 19.4 percent of freshmen say they frequently discuss politics, compared with 29.9 percent back in 1968. While the overall picture is that of

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

declining political interest, it should be noted that following record low political interest among the 2000 entering freshmen, students' interest in politics has increased in each of the last two years. These trends raise two important questions. First, why did students' interest in politics plummet throughout the 1990s? Second, what accounts for the recent reversal of these long-term trends?

Addressing the first question, we learned a great deal from students through interviews and focus groups we conducted with students during the 1990s. Students reported having negative perceptions of politics and politicians, and a sense of skepticism that was no doubt fueled by extensive media coverage of political scandals, negative campaigns, and government gridlock. Similarly, a Kettering Foundation study of college students found

that “most everything they have learned about politics, most everything they see and hear involving politics, makes them believe that it is not about solving problems; instead, it is individualistic, divisive, negative, and often counterproductive” (Harwood Group, 1993, p.5).

Second, this generation of college students, as compared to students in the 1960s and 1970s, is less likely to view politics as an effective vehicle for change (Mathews, 1993; Rimmerman, 1997). As a result, many see no particular benefit of getting involved in the larger political system. Instead, as revealed in the volunteerism trends described above, students are trying to make a difference by taking action in their local communities.

Finally, college students have reported a sense of disconnect or alienation from the political issues themselves (Reeher and Cammarano, 1997). Unlike students who attended college in the 1960s and 1970s, whose interest in politics was stimulated by issues such as the Free Speech Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War, college students in the 1990s generally did not feel that political current events were relevant to their daily lives.

Now to the question of why we have witnessed a small but noteworthy resurgence of political interest in the past two years. Although it is natural to assume that this reversal is due entirely to the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath, the survey in fact revealed an increase in political interest over the year prior to September 11. We suspect that this pre-9/11 spike in political engagement was due to the hotly-contested and intensely covered 2000 presidential election. It will take a few more years of data before we can firmly establish whether the long-term trend toward political apathy has actually been abated.

Analysis of students’ left-right political orientation provides additional perspective on the political engagement data. Since the question of political orientation was first introduced on the Freshman Survey in 1970,

the number of students identifying as “middle of the road” has risen from 45.4 percent to 50.8 percent. During the same time period, there has been a net decline in identification with “liberal” or “far left” political labels (from 36.6 percent in 1970 to 27.8 percent in 2002). “Conservative” or “far right” orientations have shown only a modest change over the last three decades, rising from 18.1 percent in 1970 to 21.3 percent in 2002.

While an increasingly moderate political orientation does not by itself imply “disengagement” from the political process, the data do in fact show that students who consider themselves “middle of the road” are significantly less likely to talk about politics than those who identify with either liberal or conservative orientations (see Figure 3). What this suggests is that the politically “moderate” student is also the more politically disengaged student.

[Insert Figure 3 around here]

The likelihood of discussing politics also varies by several other student characteristics, most notably students’ socioeconomic status and intended college major. For example, 25.2 percent of students whose mother or father holds a graduate degree discuss politics on a frequent basis, compared with 13.7 percent among students whose parents never graduated from high school. Similarly, students from families in the top 20 percent of family

[Insert Figure 4 around here]

incomes are one and a half times as likely to discuss politics frequently than are students from families falling in the lowest 20 percent of family income (see Figure 4).

The most dramatic disparities in political interest relate to students’ major (see Figure 5). Not surprisingly, students majoring in political science or history show the highest frequency of discussing politics (57.6 percent)--three times more likely than the average college student. Students majoring in English or the humanities also discuss politics at significantly

higher than average rates (33.6 and 28.9 percent, respectively). The lowest rates of political discussion occur among those freshmen majoring in the health professions and education (11.5 and 11.9 percent, respectively). This latter statistic is particularly disturbing, suggesting that it may be very difficult to fully re-ignite students' interest in politics when America's future teachers are some of the most politically disengaged students of all.

[Insert Figure 5 around here]

Impact of college on civic values and behaviors

We now turn to the question of the role that college plays in preparing students for lives of civic engagement. How do the college years influence students' civic values and behaviors, particularly their interest in and commitment to their communities and the larger society? These issues are addressed through an examination of the following research questions:

(1) How do students' civic values and behaviors change during and after the college years?

(2) How are students' civic values and behaviors affected by characteristics of the college environment (e.g., institutional size, type, and control; faculty and peer group attributes)?

(3) How are civic values and behaviors affected by students' involvement in college (e.g., courses taken and time spent on various curricular and extracurricular activities)?

In addressing these questions, the study focuses on the following three outcome measures, chosen to reflect both the attitudinal and behavioral aspects of citizenship:

(1) Commitment to social activism

(2) Sense of empowerment

(3) Community involvement

Commitment to social activism is defined in terms of the personal importance the student assigns to each of the following life goals:

participating in community action programs, helping others who are in difficulty, influencing social values, and influencing the political structure. Sense of empowerment is derived from students' level of *disagreement* with the statement, "Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society." Students who disagree with this item (i.e., are more "empowered") can be seen as exhibiting greater potential for involvement in civic life. Finally, community involvement is a behavioral measure reflecting the number of hours per week respondents report engaging in "volunteer work/community service" during the past year.

Change during and after college

This section addresses the first research question by describing how students' civic values and behaviors change during and after the college years. Changes in the four components of "social activism" are shown in Table 1. At the point of college entry (1985), 57.3 percent of

[Insert Table 1 around here]

students considered helping others in difficulty a "very important" or "essential" life goal. During the college years, students' commitment to this goal grew markedly to 68.1 percent. However, nine years after entering college, this level of commitment dropped to 60.8 percent, representing a net gain in the commitment to helping others of only 3.5 percent over nine years. Similar changes occur for two of the other social activist goals: to influence the political structure and to participate in a community action program. Students show substantial increases in both of these goals over the four years after entering college, and in both cases the gains almost entirely disappear in the years after college.

Results thus far suggest that the increase in commitment to social activism during the college years may in fact only be temporary. However, there is one measure of social activism for which gains made during the college years are retained in the years after: the commitment to influencing

social values. In this case, the dramatic increase in students' commitment to this goal seen during the college years (an increase from 27.6 percent to 45.9 percent) is followed by a post-college decline of only 1.3 percent.

The second outcome measure, sense of empowerment, exhibits very little change during the nine-years after college entry. As freshmen, 63.2 percent of students believe "somewhat" or "strongly" that an individual has the ability to change society. This figure increases only slightly--to 66.0 percent--after four years of college. Little change is seen five years later, with 67.5 percent of students reflecting a sense of empowerment. Therefore, unlike commitment to social activism, which grows significantly during college, students' confidence in their ability to make actual changes in society appears largely unchanged during college and the years after.

Turning now to our behavioral measure of citizenship, community involvement, Table 2 shows rates of volunteerism among students at three time points over the nine-year period. Involvement in volunteer service is greatest during high school (1985), with 72.1 percent of freshmen reporting participation in volunteer work during their senior year. Participation declines markedly to 35.7 percent during college (1989), and increases to 46.1 percent in the years after college (1994).

[Insert Table 2 around here]

The fluctuation in rates of volunteerism lead to the question of how much the pool of volunteers actually changes over time. Table 3 illustrates the issue of "consistency" by showing the relationship between prior volunteer experience and volunteerism conducted during and after college. Clearly, having been a volunteer in the past increases one's likelihood of volunteering again in the future. Frequent volunteering during high school more than doubles the likelihood that a student will be a frequent volunteer (more than three hours per week) both during and after college. Similarly, those who volunteered three or more hours per week in college were more than

twice as likely as non-college volunteers to frequently engage in volunteer work after college.

[Insert Table 3 around here]

While Table 3 suggests some degree of consistency in the volunteer force over time, it also demonstrates a high degree of *in*consistency in who volunteers, since many students who volunteer at one time choose not to volunteer later. For example, among frequent volunteers in high school, over half (54.7 percent) report having done no volunteer work in college, and 46.5 percent report doing no volunteer work after college. Similarly, 43.9 percent of those who reported spending three or more hours per week volunteering in college report spending no time volunteering after college. This marked disappearance of the volunteer force suggests that the habits of volunteerism that are fostered in high school and in college are very unstable over time.

The impact of college

While the previous section establishes that students' civic values and behaviors change during and after college, it does not explain why such changes occur. This section addresses the second and third research questions by summarizing how college influences each of our three dimensions of citizenship—commitment to social activism, sense of empowerment, and community involvement—in the years after college (as measured by the 1994 follow-up survey). In particular, how are these outcomes affected by characteristics of institutions, curricula, faculty, and peer groups? What role is played by place of residence, choice of major, and various forms of involvement?

In order to examine these college effects, it was important to exert as much control as possible over self-selection (that is, over potentially biasing entering-student characteristics). Preliminary analyses showed that key predisposing factors include a pre-college commitment to social activism, prior volunteer experience, and being female. Regression analyses controlled

for these early predictors before examining the net effects of college on the three dimensions of citizenship.

Commitment to social activism

How does college influence students' commitment to social activism in the years after college? Among characteristics of the college environment, two appear to be particularly influential. First is the positive effect of a commitment to social activism among the student body at the institution (as determined by calculating mean scores on social activism for all respondents at an institution). In other words, regardless of students' pre-college commitment to social activist goals such as helping others in difficulty and influencing the political structure, they tend to become even more committed to these goals if they attend a college where *other* students espouse a social activist mentality.

The second environmental influence on students' commitment to social activism is the negative effect of majoring in engineering. Students who major in engineering are less likely to develop a personal commitment to social activism. This effect is consistent with Astin's (1993a) finding that majoring in engineering is associated with increases in materialism and conservatism and declines in concern for the larger society. Findings in the present study suggest that these deleterious effects of engineering persist in the years after college.

Additional effects on the commitment to social activism include the positive effects of time spent attending religious services, performing volunteer work, attending classes and labs, and exercising or playing sports. Students who spend more time watching television, on the other hand, are less likely to develop a commitment to social activism. This latter finding is consistent with earlier research showing that watching television is associated with the development of materialistic values and a decline in concern for the well-being of others (Astin, 1993a).

Sense of empowerment

The second citizenship outcome--sense of empowerment--is significantly influenced by only one characteristic of the college environment. That is, the positive effect of the socioeconomic level of the student's peer group. In other words, attending a college that enrolls students from wealthier and more highly-educated families tends to promote students' post-college belief that individuals have the ability to change society.

Students' sense of empowerment is also positively influenced by several measures of involvement, including: socializing with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, discussing political and social issues, and attending religious services. Conversely, declines in empowerment result from feeling depressed while in college as well as by the perception that college administrators do not care about student concerns.

Community involvement

With respect to the behavioral measure of citizenship—community involvement—only one measure of the college environment has a significant influence: the commitment to social activism among the students' peers. In other words, attending a college where other students are highly committed to social activism tends to encourage students' own involvement in their communities in the years after college.

Several measures of student involvement during college appear to promote post-college volunteerism: attending religious services, attending racial/cultural awareness workshops, socializing with students of different racial/ethnic groups, working full-time, performing volunteer work, and talking with faculty outside class. Together, these measures reflect the critical role of personal interaction, either with students, faculty, co-workers, or employers. Finally, cigarette smoking during college is associated with lower rates of volunteerism in the post-college years.

Summary and Discussion

This chapter has focused on the development of citizenship among college students. Citizenship development was addressed through an examination of trends among successive cohorts of entering freshmen, as well as by assessing how students' sense of civic responsibility changes during and after the college years.

The trend data revealed that while students today volunteer in record numbers, their overall engagement in the political process remains low (despite the recent small resurgence of political interest). These trends suggest that students are placing their energies where they feel they can make a difference—by getting involved in issues such as education, crime, the environment, and homelessness in their local communities. Given their frustration with political scandals and negative political campaigns, students simply may not perceive politics as an effective vehicle for positive change. It remains to be seen, however, whether recent gains in political interest can be sustained, as students in a post-9/11 society assume greater responsibility for keeping themselves informed about political issues and current events.

Next, longitudinal analyses described in this chapter have shown that college is associated with increases in many measures of civic responsibility. In particular, during the college years students become more committed to helping others in difficulty, influencing social values, influencing the political structure, and participating in community action programs. Such findings are consistent with earlier research showing college to be associated with gains in altruism and civic responsibility (Astin, 1977, 1993a; Bowen, 1980; Hyman and Wright, 1979; Jacob, 1957; Pascarella, Smart, and Braxton, 1986; Pascarella and Terenzini,1991). However, findings presented in this chapter show that many of these gains disappear in the first several years after college, suggesting that the effects of college on

students' altruistic or community orientations may in fact only be temporary. Further, although the majority of students' are involved in volunteer work or community service before starting college, the likelihood of volunteering is significantly lower during college and in the years immediately after. As noted earlier, these results reflect the experiences of students attending college in the 1980s. Follow-up data currently being collected on students attending college in the 1990s will allow for a re-investigation of this issue.

Finally, this chapter examined the ways in which colleges *promote* students' sense of civic responsibility after college. As described in the section above, many different aspects of the college experience serve to influence students' commitment to social activism, sense of empowerment, and community involvement. Among those, three stand out as being particularly effective. First is the amount of time students spend in religious services or meetings, which positively influences all three citizenship outcomes. The role of religious involvement is not surprising, given the emphasis on altruism and philanthropy inherent in most religions.

Second is the effect of performing volunteer work during the college years, which enhances students' commitment to social activism and involvement in the community after college. Clearly, forming a habit of volunteerism is critical to the long-term development of citizenship. Nevertheless, findings also show how the pool of volunteers changes dramatically from high school to college, and again from college to the years after. Together, these findings suggest that in order to build and maintain a volunteer labor force, efforts to promote volunteerism in college should focus as much on retention as they do on recruitment.

A third common theme influencing citizenship development is socializing with students from different racial/ethnic groups, which influenced both the sense of empowerment as well as students' involvement in their communities

after college. Further, students' likelihood of community involvement was also enhanced by attending racial/cultural awareness workshops. While positive effects of "diversity" activities have been reported in four-year longitudinal research (Astin, 1993a, 1993b), this study has demonstrated that interacting with and learning from people different from oneself have effects that last *beyond* the college years.

Lastly, college experiences that tend to *discourage* citizenship development include smoking cigarettes, watching television, and feeling depressed. As a group, these experiences suggest that engaging in relatively isolated or antisocial behaviors will tend to inhibit the development of civic responsibility in college students.

In sum, it appears that the development of civic responsibility during the college years is enhanced by students' degree of *involvement* during college--mainly, interacting with students and faculty through curricular and co-curricular activities. These findings are consistent with previous research describing involvement as a key predictor of altruistic values or behaviors (Astin, 1993a; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella, Ethington, and Smart, 1988).

It is interesting to consider the dynamics of the relationship between involvement and civic responsibility. On the one hand, citizenship development is enhanced by the *nature* of specific activities, such as attending religious services, socializing across racial/ethnic lines, and discussing political and social issues. On the other hand, students who become involved in such activities are likely forming a *habit* of involvement; it is this habit that carries over into students' lives in the years after college.

Therefore, the message to institutions is to provide a wide variety of opportunities for student involvement, particularly in ways that expose students' to a diversity of people and issues. The more involved and

connected students become during college, the more likely they will seek out forms of involvement in their communities after college. In other words, “civic education” is more than simply teaching students “civics.” Instead, education for citizenship can be accomplished more broadly, by encouraging students to become active and proactive participants in the learning process by pursuing their own interests and making meaningful connections with students and faculty. In this way, colleges can contribute to the development of good citizenship among individual college students while at the same time investing in the long-term welfare of the larger society.

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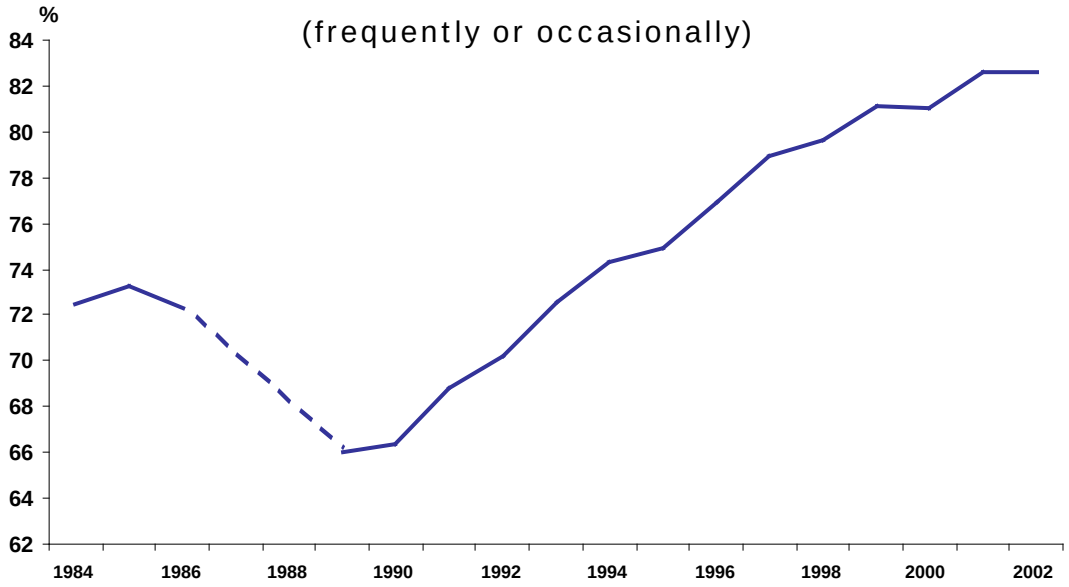
Figure 1

Freshman Involvement in Volunteer Work

(frequently or occasionally)



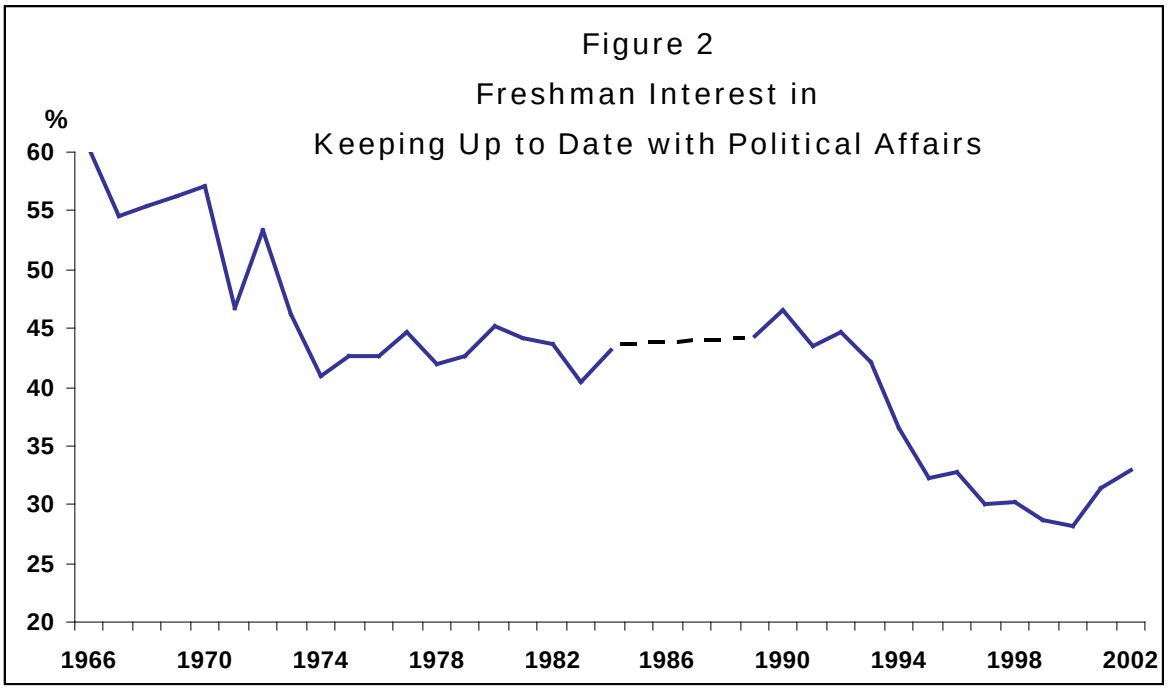


Figure 2
Freshman Interest in
Keeping Up to Date with Political Affairs
%
60
55
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
1966
1970
1974
1978
1982
1986
1990
1994
1998
2002

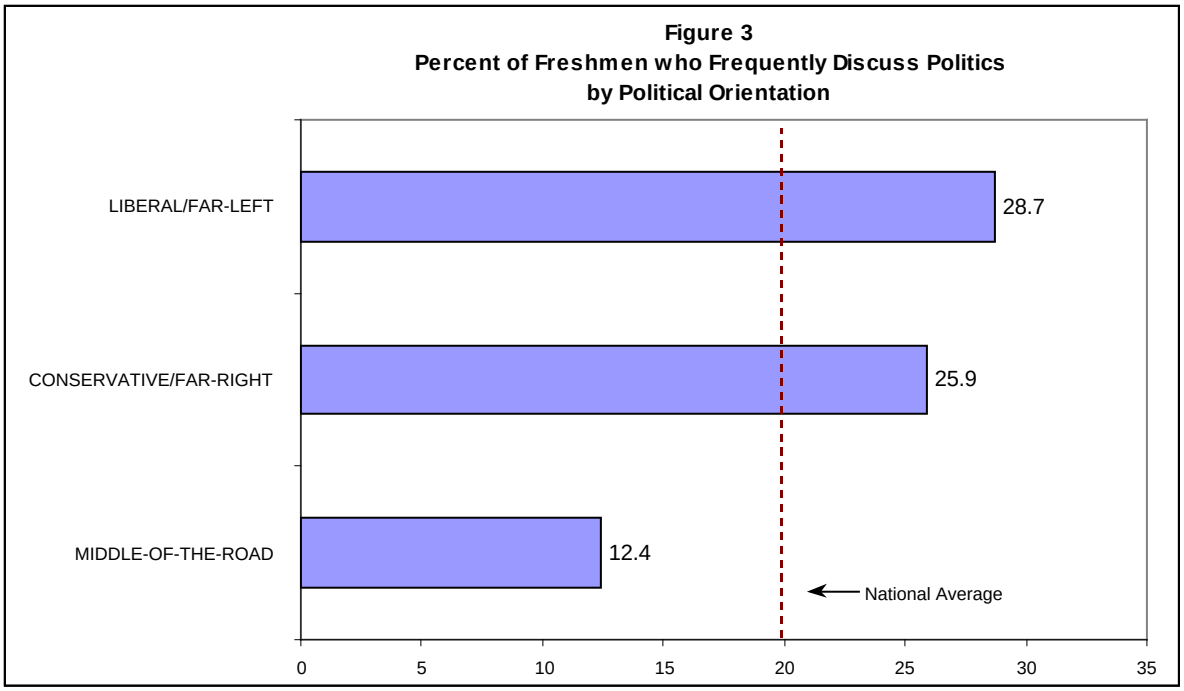


Figure 3
Percent of Freshmen who Frequently Discuss Politics
by Political Orientation
LIBERAL/FAR-LEFT
28.7
CONSERVATIVE/FAR-RIGHT
25.9
MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD
12.4
National Average
0
5
10
15
20
25
30
35

Figure 4
Percentage of Freshmen who Frequently Discuss Politics by Level of Parental Income

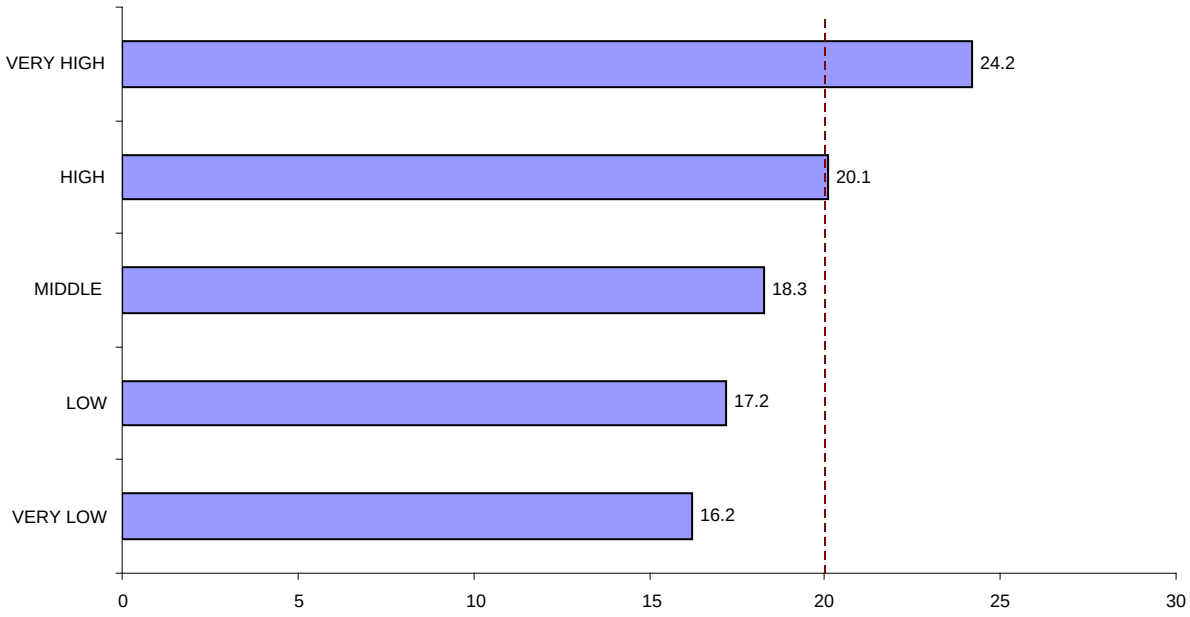


Figure 5
Percentage of Freshmen who Frequently Discuss Politics by Major

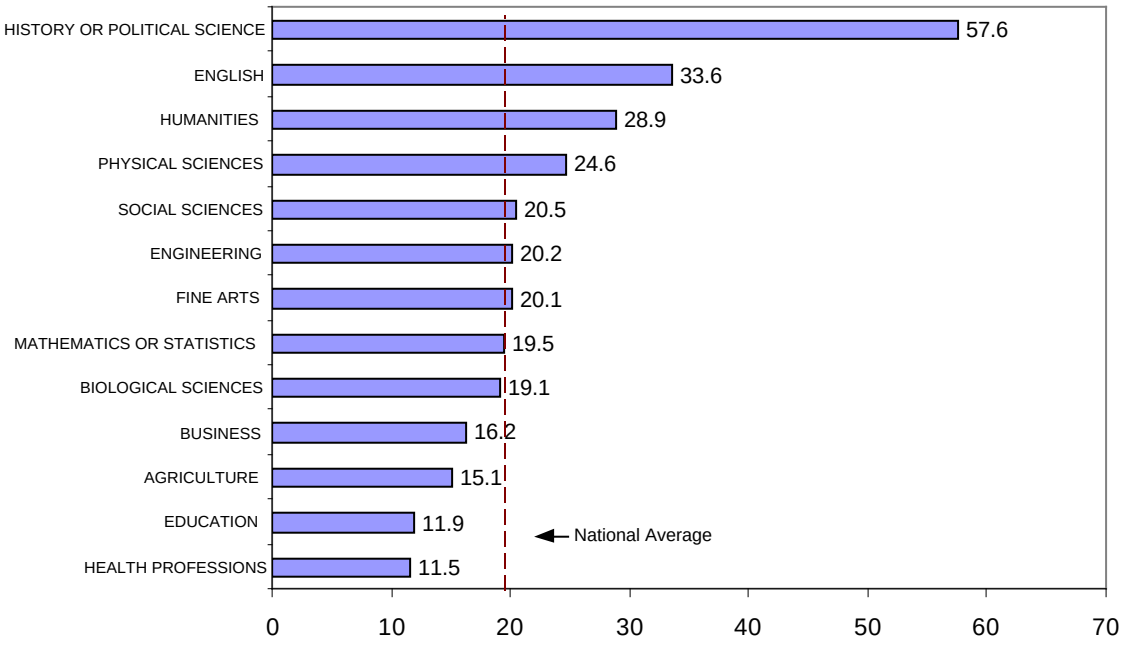


Table 1. Commitment to Social Activism: Change over time

				Change		
	1985	1989	1994	85-89	89-94	85-94
Help others who are in difficulty	57.3	68.1	60.8	+10.8	-7.3	+3.5
Influence social values	27.6	45.9	44.6	+18.3	-1.3	+17.0
Participate in a commty. action program	20.4	29.5	21.3	+9.1	-8.2	+0.9
Influence the political structure	13.0	18.0	13.1	+5.0	-4.9	+0.1

Table 2

Rates of Volunteer Participation: High School, College, and Post-College

Level of participation	Percentage
High School (1984-85)	
Frequent	17.4
Occasional	54.7
Not at all	27.9
College (1988-89)	
3 or more hours per week	11.4
1-2 hours per week	14.0
Less than 1 hour per week	10.3
Never	64.3
Post-College (1994)	
3 or more hours per week	15.0
1-2 hours per week	10.7
Less than 1 hour per week	20.4
Never	53.9

Table x

Consistency in Volunteerism Over Time

	Level of college (1998)participation (in hours)							
Level of	Women				Men			
participation	3+	1-2	<1	None	3+	1-2	<1	None
High School (1994)								
Frequent								
Occasional								
Not at all								