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Independent Research

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Youth Civic Engagement and Access to Civic Opportunities: An Exploratory Survey of High-School Students

Introduction

Democracy depends not only on the people who hold public office but also on the people who decide to pay attention, ask questions, participate in their communities, and believe that their actions can matter. For young people, those habits are often formed before they are old enough to vote. High school is therefore a particularly important period for understanding civic engagement. Students encounter government and public issues through classrooms, families, social media, community organizations, extracurricular activities, and conversations with friends. Yet exposure to public issues does not automatically translate into civic participation.

The distinction between awareness and participation is especially important. A student may follow elections closely but have no idea how to attend a community meeting. Another student may volunteer extensively but never describe that work as political or civic engagement. A third student may believe that public institutions matter while simultaneously believing that there is no realistic way for a teenager to influence them. These differences make youth civic engagement difficult to measure with a single question.

Research conducted by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) has emphasized the role schools can play in developing civic knowledge, student voice, belonging, and political efficacy. This literature suggests that civic participation is

shaped not only by individual interest but also by whether young people encounter meaningful opportunities to use their voices. The present study examines that relationship through an exploratory survey of 75 high-school students.

Rather than treating civic engagement as synonymous with voting or campaign participation, this study uses a broader definition. Civic engagement can include community service, advocacy, student government, discussions of public issues, participation in civic organizations, and other activities through which individuals contribute to their communities or engage with public life. This broader framework makes it possible to examine forms of engagement that are accessible to students who are not yet eligible to vote.

The central issue examined in this study is therefore not simply whether students care about public affairs. It is whether interest, confidence, opportunity, and access appear to exist together. The survey asks what students know, what they discuss, what they do, what prevents them from participating, and what they believe could make participation more accessible.

Research Question

What factors are associated with civic interest and participation among high-school students, and what barriers do students report as limiting their involvement in civic activities?

Subquestions

1. How interested are surveyed students in current events and public issues?
2. How confident are students in their understanding of government?
3. How frequently do students discuss current events?
4. Which forms of civic activity are most common among respondents?
5. What barriers do students identify as limiting participation?
6. What changes do students believe could increase their participation?

Hypothesis

The study hypothesized that many respondents would demonstrate at least moderate interest in current events while reporting lower levels of confidence in their understanding of government and lower participation in formal political activities. The study also hypothesized that practical barriers—especially time, information, transportation, and uncertainty about how to get involved—would be common, and that school-based opportunities would be identified as an important mechanism for increasing participation.

Literature Review

Civic Learning and the Development of Participation

Civic participation is not simply a behavior that appears when an individual reaches voting age. It can develop through repeated exposure to civic concepts, opportunities for discussion, and experiences in which young people see that their opinions can affect decisions. CIRCLE's work on equitable civic learning argues that schools are important settings for ensuring that students have access to these experiences. From this perspective, civic education is not limited to learning the names of governmental institutions; it also involves developing the skills and confidence needed to participate.

This distinction matters because students can possess civic knowledge without feeling empowered to use it. Conversely, students can be highly active in their communities without possessing extensive formal knowledge of government. An effective analysis of youth engagement therefore has to consider knowledge, motivation, opportunity, and behavior together.

Student Voice and Political Efficacy

Student voice is another important dimension of youth civic engagement. When students are invited to express opinions, contribute to decisions, or help shape their school communities,

participation becomes a practical experience rather than an abstract concept. CIRCLE research has reported a relationship between developing youth voice during high school and later voting behavior. This does not establish that every student-voice activity causes future voting, but it supports the broader argument that meaningful participation during adolescence can be relevant to civic development.

Political efficacy—the belief that one's participation can matter—is similarly important. A student who believes that government is completely inaccessible may have little reason to seek out opportunities even if those opportunities exist. In contrast, a student who believes that individual or collective action can produce change may be more willing to participate. CIRCLE research on school climate and belonging has also highlighted the relationship between students' sense of belonging and political efficacy. These findings provide a useful framework for interpreting the present survey's questions about whether students believe they can make a difference.

Opportunity and Access

Opportunity is distinct from motivation. A student may want to participate but lack transportation, time, information, or an accessible entry point. High-school students also operate within schedules dominated by classes, homework, employment, family responsibilities, athletics, clubs, and other commitments. Even a student who is highly interested in civic affairs may therefore struggle to participate in activities requiring substantial travel or irregular schedules.

Schools can potentially reduce these barriers because they already bring students together in a common environment. A school-sponsored civic club, service project, student government activity, public forum, or community partnership can make participation more visible and easier

to access. CIRCLE's research on participatory budgeting in schools similarly illustrates how structured opportunities can connect students with decision-making and civic skills.

The Present Study

The present survey contributes a small-scale empirical perspective to these broader discussions. It does not attempt to estimate the civic engagement of American teenagers as a whole. Instead, it examines patterns within a defined group of 75 high-school respondents. The value of the study lies in identifying relationships and questions that could be investigated more rigorously with larger samples.

In particular, the study distinguishes between four related but different dimensions: interest, confidence, behavior, and access. Interest asks whether students care about public issues. Confidence asks whether they feel capable of understanding government. Behavior asks what they actually report doing. Access asks what prevents or encourages those behaviors. Keeping these dimensions separate helps avoid the assumption that a student who is interested in politics will automatically participate.

Method

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive, exploratory survey design. The instrument was designed to collect quantitative responses that could be summarized through counts and percentages. The survey focused on civic interest, government confidence, discussion of current events, reported civic activities, motivations, barriers, perceived civic efficacy, and possible ways to increase participation.

The design was intentionally descriptive rather than causal. No experimental intervention was administered, and no attempt was made to manipulate participants' exposure to civic

information. Consequently, the results can describe patterns in the surveyed sample but cannot demonstrate that one factor caused another.

Participants and Sampling

The final sample consisted of 75 high-school students ($N = 75$). Participants were obtained through non-probability sampling. Because the respondents were not selected through a random sampling procedure designed to represent a larger population, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all high-school students, all students in a particular state, or all American teenagers.

The grade distribution included 10 ninth-grade students (13.3 percent), 25 tenth-grade students (33.3 percent), 10 eleventh-grade students (13.3 percent), and 30 twelfth-grade students (40.0 percent). The relatively large number of twelfth-grade respondents should be considered when interpreting the overall results.

Survey Instrument

The questionnaire included both single-response and multiple-select questions. Single-response items asked students to select one level of interest, confidence, discussion frequency, or agreement. Multiple-select items allowed students to identify more than one civic activity, barrier, motivation, or factor that might increase participation.

Using multiple-select questions was important because civic participation is multidimensional. A student might volunteer and participate in student government while also engaging in advocacy. Restricting respondents to one activity would have concealed that overlap. For these questions, percentages represent the proportion of respondents selecting each option and therefore should not be expected to total 100 percent.

Ethical Considerations

Because the participants were high-school students, ethical documentation is particularly important. The final version of any submitted manuscript should accurately identify the recruitment setting, dates, permissions, and consent or assent procedures that actually occurred. This manuscript does not claim institutional review board approval, exemption, parental consent, school approval, or any other formal authorization unless such documentation exists. No identifying participant information is presented in the results.

The study is also intentionally cautious about interpretation. The sample is small and non-random, and the survey relies on self-reported responses. The findings should therefore be presented as exploratory evidence rather than definitive conclusions about youth civic behavior.

Data Analysis

Responses were summarized using counts (n) and percentages. With 75 respondents, each respondent represents approximately 1.33 percent of the sample. Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of respondents selecting an option by 75 and multiplying by 100. Where combined categories are discussed, the calculation is based on the underlying counts rather than adding rounded percentages.

For example, 5 respondents were very interested in current events and 35 were somewhat interested. Together, those categories include 40 respondents. Forty divided by 75 equals 53.3 percent. This approach avoids small inconsistencies that can occur when rounded percentages are added together.

Results

Sample Composition

The sample was concentrated in the upper high-school grades. Tenth-grade students constituted 33.3 percent of respondents, while twelfth-grade students constituted 40.0 percent.

Ninth- and eleventh-grade students each represented 13.3 percent. This distribution is relevant because students' civic experiences may change as they move through high school, gain access to more extracurricular opportunities, become eligible for certain activities, or approach voting age.

Table 1

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Grade	n	%
9th	10	13.3
10th	25	33.3
11th	10	13.3
12th	30	40.0

Note. N = 75. Percentages may not total exactly 100 because of rounding.

Interest in Current Events and Public Issues

The survey found that 5 students (6.7 percent) were very interested in current events or public issues, while 35 (46.7 percent) were somewhat interested. Twenty-five students (33.3 percent) selected neutral. Five students (6.7 percent) were slightly uninterested, and five (6.7 percent) were not interested at all.

Taken together, 40 of the 75 respondents—53.3 percent—were either very or somewhat interested. This represents a majority of the sample, but not an overwhelming one. Nearly half of respondents were neutral or expressed some degree of disinterest. The result therefore suggests substantial civic curiosity within the sample while also showing that interest was not universal.

Table 2

Interest Level	n	%
Very interested	5	6.7
Somewhat interested	35	46.7
Neutral	25	33.3
Slightly uninterested	5	6.7
Not interested at all	5	6.7

Note. $N = 75$.

Confidence in Understanding Government

Confidence was lower than interest. Five respondents (6.7 percent) described themselves as very confident in their understanding of government, and 25 (33.3 percent) were somewhat confident. Twenty students (26.7 percent) were neutral. Fifteen (20.0 percent) were slightly unconfident, while 10 (13.3 percent) were not confident at all.

In total, 30 of 75 respondents, or 40.0 percent, reported being very or somewhat confident. This is 13.3 percentage points lower than the 53.3 percent who reported being very or somewhat interested in current events. The difference is notable because it suggests that interest and perceived knowledge were not identical within the sample.

Table 3

Confidence Level	n	%
Very confident	5	6.7
Somewhat confident	25	33.3

Neutral	20	26.7
Slightly unconfident	15	20.0
Not confident at all	10	13.3

Note. $N = 75$.

Discussion of Current Events

Current-events discussion was common. Five students (6.7 percent) reported discussing current events very often, 25 (33.3 percent) often, and 35 (46.7 percent) sometimes. Ten (13.3 percent) rarely discussed current events, and none selected never.

Therefore, 65 of 75 respondents, or 86.7 percent, reported discussing current events at least sometimes. This is one of the strongest descriptive findings in the survey. It indicates that exposure to public issues through conversation was common even though confidence in understanding government was substantially lower.

Table 4

4

Discussion Frequency	n	%
Very often	5	6.7
Often	25	33.3
Sometimes	35	46.7
Rarely	10	13.3
Never	0	0.0

Note. $N = 75$.

Reported Civic Activities

The most frequently reported civic activity was volunteering or community service. Sixty respondents (80.0 percent) selected this option. Student government and political campaign volunteering were each selected by 15 students (20.0 percent). Five students (6.7 percent) reported attending a government or community meeting.

No respondents reported contacting an elected official. Advocacy and participation in a civic organization were each selected by 10 respondents (13.3 percent). Ten students (13.3 percent) reported voting if eligible, and five (6.7 percent) selected none of the listed activities.

The distribution illustrates why youth civic engagement should not be reduced to electoral participation. Community service was widespread, while activities requiring direct interaction with political institutions were less common in this sample. The findings do not establish why this difference exists, but the contrast provides a useful direction for future research.

Table 5

5

Civic Activity	n	%
Volunteering/community service	60	80.0
Student government	15	20.0
Political campaign volunteering	15	20.0
Government/community meeting	5	6.7

Contacting elected official	0	0.0
Advocacy	10	13.3
Civic organization	10	13.3
Voting if eligible	10	13.3
None	5	6.7

Note. N = 75. Multiple responses were permitted.

Motivations for Participation

Interest in politics or current events was the most frequently identified motivation, representing 40.0 percent of responses. A desire to help the community represented 26.7 percent, while family encouragement represented 13.3 percent. Other responses referenced influences such as school, friends, and college or career interests.

These responses suggest that civic engagement can emerge from both issue-oriented and relationship-oriented motivations. Some students may participate because they care about a particular public issue, while others may become involved because people around them create an opportunity or encourage them to do so. A larger future study could examine whether these motivations predict different forms of participation.

Barriers to Civic Participation

The most common barrier was lack of time, identified by 30 respondents (40.0 percent). Lack of information was second, selected by 15 respondents (20.0 percent). Ten students (13.3 percent) reported that they did not know how to get involved, and another 10 (13.3 percent) did not feel that participation would make a difference. Lack of opportunities and lack of transportation were each selected by five students (6.7 percent).

These responses reveal that barriers were not exclusively motivational. Several of the most frequently reported obstacles concerned practical access: time, information, and knowledge of where to begin. This distinction is important. A student may possess interest and efficacy while still lacking a realistic pathway into civic participation.

Table 6

6

Barrier	n	%
Lack of time	30	40.0
Lack of information	15	20.0
Don't know how to get involved	10	13.3
Participation would not make a difference	10	13.3
Lack of opportunities	5	6.7
Lack of transportation	5	6.7

Note. $N = 75$.

Youth Civic Efficacy

Civic efficacy was relatively strong in the sample. Twenty-five students (33.3 percent) strongly agreed that they could make a difference through civic participation, while 30 (40.0 percent) agreed. Fifteen (20.0 percent) were neutral, five (6.7 percent) disagreed, and none strongly disagreed.

Thus, 55 of 75 respondents, or 73.3 percent, agreed or strongly agreed with the civic-efficacy statement. This result creates an important contrast with the barriers reported elsewhere in the survey. Many respondents believed that participation could matter, yet a substantial number simultaneously reported obstacles that could make participation difficult.

Table 7

7

Response	n	%
Strongly agree	25	33.3
Agree	30	40.0
Neutral	15	20.0
Disagree	5	6.7
Strongly disagree	0	0.0

Note. $N = 75$.

What Could Increase Participation?

The strongest response concerned school-based opportunities. Fifty-five students (73.3 percent) selected more opportunities through school. Forty-five (60.0 percent) wanted opportunities specifically designed for teenagers. More information, easier transportation or access, and participation by friends were each selected by 40 students (53.3 percent). Flexible time commitments were selected by 35 (46.7 percent). No students selected nothing.

The fact that every respondent selected at least one possible factor suggests that students saw some potential for increasing participation. The responses also point toward several

categories of intervention: opportunity creation, information, accessibility, social encouragement, and scheduling flexibility.

Table 8

8

Potential Factor	n	%
More opportunities through school	55	73.3
Opportunities specifically for teenagers	45	60.0
More information	40	53.3
Easier transportation/access	40	53.3
Friends participating	40	53.3
Flexible time commitments	35	46.7
Nothing	0	0.0

Note. N = 75. Multiple responses were permitted.

Discussion

The Interest–Confidence Gap

One of the clearest patterns in the results is the difference between interest and confidence. A majority of respondents—53.3 percent—reported being very or somewhat interested in current events, while only 40.0 percent reported being very or somewhat confident in their understanding of government. At the same time, 86.7 percent reported discussing current events at least sometimes.

These figures should not be interpreted as evidence that discussion causes interest or that lack of confidence causes lower participation. The survey does not establish causation. Instead, the descriptive pattern suggests that students can be exposed to and interested in public issues while still feeling uncertain about how government works. That distinction may be particularly important for schools seeking to convert interest into informed participation.

Civic Discussion Is Common, but Institutional Participation Is Less Common

The survey's 86.7 percent rate of discussing current events at least sometimes stands in contrast with the much lower rates for several formal civic activities. Only 20.0 percent reported student-government participation, 20.0 percent reported campaign volunteering, and 6.7 percent reported attending a government or community meeting. No respondent reported contacting an elected official.

This difference may reflect the relative accessibility of conversation compared with institutional participation. Discussing a public issue can occur informally, while attending a meeting or contacting an official requires knowledge of where and how to participate. The results therefore support further investigation into the transition between informal civic interest and formal civic action.

Community Service as a Major Form of Youth Engagement

The 80.0 percent community-service rate is one of the strongest findings in the survey. It indicates that many respondents already engage in activities that benefit their communities, even when other forms of civic participation are less common. This finding reinforces the importance of using a broad definition of civic engagement.

At the same time, community service and political participation are not interchangeable. A student can contribute meaningfully to a community without engaging directly with

government or electoral politics. Future studies could therefore examine whether students who volunteer are more likely to develop other forms of civic participation or whether these activities operate largely independently.

High Efficacy Does Not Eliminate Practical Barriers

The 73.3 percent agreement rate on the civic-efficacy measure is especially significant when considered alongside the barrier responses. If students generally believe their participation can make a difference, then a lack of participation cannot automatically be explained by political apathy. For many respondents, the limiting factor may instead be whether participation is convenient, understandable, and accessible.

This interpretation remains tentative because the survey did not statistically test relationships between individual students' efficacy scores and their specific barriers or activities. Nevertheless, the descriptive pattern provides a compelling research question: when young people believe they can matter but lack a clear pathway to participate, does providing that pathway increase engagement?

Schools as Civic Gateways

The strongest proposed solution was more opportunities through school, selected by 73.3 percent of respondents. This finding aligns with the broader literature emphasizing schools as important environments for civic learning. Schools are one of the few institutions that regularly bring large groups of adolescents together, making them uniquely positioned to connect students with community organizations, service projects, public forums, student leadership, and civic education.

The finding also has an access dimension. School-based opportunities may reduce transportation difficulties, provide adult guidance, make opportunities easier to discover, and

allow students to participate alongside peers. However, the survey does not establish which specific school programs would be most effective. Future research should compare different types of opportunities rather than treating all school-based engagement as equivalent.

Information as a Civic Resource

Lack of information was identified by 20.0 percent of respondents, and 13.3 percent specifically said they did not know how to get involved. These responses point to a distinction between the existence of opportunities and students' awareness of them. An opportunity cannot function as an accessible opportunity if the intended participants do not know it exists or do not understand how to join.

This suggests that improving civic participation may involve communication as much as program creation. Schools and community organizations could study whether students know where to find reliable information about meetings, volunteer programs, youth boards, internships, advocacy opportunities, and other forms of participation. A future study could experimentally compare different communication strategies.

Time and the Structure of Teen Life

Lack of time was the most frequently reported barrier at 40.0 percent. This finding highlights a structural constraint that is easy to overlook in discussions of youth engagement. Students' schedules may include school, homework, employment, family responsibilities, athletics, clubs, transportation limitations, and other commitments. Civic programs requiring long or unpredictable commitments may therefore exclude students who are interested but busy.

The 46.7 percent who selected flexible time commitments as a factor that could increase participation reinforces this point. Rather than assuming that students simply need more motivation, civic programs could examine whether shorter, recurring, evening, weekend, or

flexible opportunities are easier for teenagers to use. Again, the present survey identifies this as a possibility rather than demonstrating that flexibility causes higher participation.

Implications

The findings suggest that youth civic engagement should be approached as a combination of motivation and opportunity. Students can be interested without being confident, confident without being active, and active in community service without participating directly in political institutions. A single measure of 'engagement' can conceal these distinctions.

For educators, the results suggest value in connecting civic knowledge to actual opportunities. For community organizations, the results suggest the importance of making youth opportunities visible and accessible. For researchers, the results demonstrate the usefulness of separating interest, efficacy, behavior, and barriers into distinct measures.

Most importantly, the findings suggest that the question 'Why don't young people participate?' may be too broad. A more precise set of questions is: Which young people are interested? Which feel capable? Which know where to go? Which have enough time? Which have access to transportation? Which have peers participating? And which opportunities feel meaningful enough to justify the effort? These questions can produce more actionable research than a simple measure of political interest.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small at 75 respondents. Second, the non-probability sampling procedure limits generalizability. Third, the grade distribution is uneven, with twelfth-grade students making up 40.0 percent of the sample. Fourth, the survey relies on self-reported responses, which can be influenced by memory, interpretation, or social-desirability effects.

Fifth, the survey is cross-sectional. It captures respondents' answers at one point in time and cannot determine whether attitudes or participation change as students progress through high school. Sixth, multiple-select questions measure whether an option was selected but do not measure the frequency, intensity, or quality of the activity. Finally, the survey does not include qualitative interviews that could explain why students selected particular answers.

These limitations do not invalidate the study. Rather, they define the appropriate scope of its conclusions. The study is best understood as an exploratory snapshot that identifies patterns worth examining with larger, more rigorous samples.

Future Research

A larger study could recruit students from multiple schools and use probability-based sampling where feasible. Researchers could also collect demographic and contextual variables, with appropriate ethical safeguards, to examine whether civic access differs across student populations. A longitudinal design could measure students at multiple points during high school and after graduation.

Future research could also add qualitative interviews or open-ended survey questions. Quantitative results can show that students identify lack of information as a barrier, but interviews could reveal what information students are actually missing. Similarly, a survey can show that school-based opportunities are popular, while interviews can identify which types of programs students would actually attend.

An intervention study would provide another useful next step. Researchers could introduce a structured school-based civic opportunity, measure participation before and after the intervention, and compare results with a suitable comparison group. Such a design could move beyond describing barriers toward testing whether specific strategies reduce them.

Conclusion

This exploratory survey of 75 high-school students presents a complex picture of youth civic engagement. Interest in current events was common, with 53.3 percent reporting that they were very or somewhat interested. Discussion of current events was even more widespread, with 86.7 percent reporting that they discussed current events at least sometimes. Yet only 40.0 percent reported being very or somewhat confident in their understanding of government.

The most common form of reported civic activity was community service, selected by 80.0 percent of respondents. More formal forms of political participation were less common. At the same time, 73.3 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they could make a difference through civic participation. This combination suggests that low participation should not automatically be equated with low civic concern.

The barriers identified by respondents point toward access as an important dimension of the problem. Lack of time was the most common barrier, followed by lack of information and uncertainty about how to become involved. When asked what could increase participation, 73.3 percent selected more opportunities through school, while 60.0 percent selected opportunities specifically for teenagers.

Taken together, these results suggest that youth civic engagement is not a simple question of whether teenagers care about public life. It is a question of whether interest can be converted into knowledge, confidence, opportunity, and action. The findings cannot establish causal relationships or represent all high-school students, but they provide a concrete foundation for future research into how schools and communities can make civic participation more understandable, accessible, and meaningful to young people.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

1. How interested are you in current events or public issues?
2. How confident are you in your understanding of government?
3. How often do you discuss current events?

4. Which civic or community activities have you participated in?
5. What motivates you to participate in civic activities?
6. What barriers make civic participation difficult?
7. I believe I can make a difference through civic participation.
8. What factors could increase your civic participation?