

# Next

## THEY'VE GOT

*Young People Willing to be Involved; Policymakers Must Engage Them*

Research indicates that **Generation Next**—those young people born from 1981–1988—are less civically engaged than any other generation when they were the same age. What can policymakers do to prompt higher participation?

By Laura Coleman

They have tattoos, piercings or both, aren't afraid to dye their hair unorthodox colors, and are more culturally and socially tolerant than any other generation. They grew up with personal computers and cell phones and came of age in the shadow of 9/11.

They are heavily involved in their communities and think community engagement is very important. Civic engagement, on the other hand, is a different story—only about four-in-10 agree with the statement, "It's my duty as a citizen to always vote."

Meet Generation Next, young people born between 1981 and 1988.

While this demographic presents very unique challenges to policymakers during campaign seasons, according to Wendy Wheeler, president of the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, it's not impossible to involve these people in the political process.

"I think it's not real to them. They're very engaged in things that influence community change," she said. "But I think the traditional policy influencing structures we have are exclusionary to young people. Statistically young people are very good at raising money for volunteer organizations—through run-walks or fun runs, for example. So it's not that they don't want to participate ... It's that the structures aren't set up in a way that meets their needs or is engaging to them."

Dr. Dan Shea, director of the Center for Political Participation at Allegheny College, agrees that this generation is more community than politically minded.

"There is a whole bunch of data to suggest that volunteer rates are growing every year, and not just for high school seniors or college freshmen," Shea said. "But at the same time, the data suggest they are not especially political. There is a disconnect between civic engagement and community engagement. This is very worrisome for us. One generation removed from the political process will have consequences."

Engaging young people in politics could sound like a tedious task, requiring a bridge to span the perceived generation chasm. But while some characteristics of Generation Next make them very unique, other aspects may prove very similar to those of their lawmaking elders.

### What Defines Generation Next?

During the seven-year span when Generation Nexters were born, Ronald Reagan was president, AIDS had just been identified, the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded, terrorists blew up Pan American 747 over Scotland, and the Intifada movement began in the West Bank.



Then, during their more formative years, came the O.J. Simpson trial; the don't ask, don't tell military policy; the war in Bosnia; sheep cloning; President Clinton's impeachment; intellectual property disputes; and most notably, the events of Sept. 11, 2001.

Data from the 2004 U.S. Census indicate that there are about 27,808 Generation Nexters in the United States, and only 14,334 are registered to vote. This means that 48.5 percent of the generation is not registered. Of those who are registered, 58.1 percent reported they do not vote.

Coincidentally, most state legislators fall into the Baby Boomer Generation. According to two-year old data from the National Conference of State Legislators, the average state legislator is 56 years old.

### ***Outlook and Worldview***

More than nine-in-10 Nexters are satisfied with their family life and with their relationships with their parents, according to a report by the Pew Research Center.

But according to Shea, it's not just their relationships with family that matter. It's the connection between their parents' participation in politics and the child's future participation that makes a difference.

"It's a very important variable, which helps explain why fewer young people are turning out to the polls," Shea said. "Many of their parents came of political age during the 60s and 70s, so they've raised their kids to be active, but not through traditional channels."

This makes sense: The Pew report deemed Generation Next the least traditional generation. Seventy-five percent of young people polled say this generation is more likely to have casual sex than young people 20 years ago, 69 percent say they engage in binge drinking more often than their predecessors, and 63 percent say they use illegal drugs more often.

In the late 1980s, 11 percent of young people classified themselves as non-religious, compared to 20 percent of today's 18- to 25-year-olds. Forty-three percent of Nexters say churches should keep out of political matters, which is similar to the opinions of Seniors—52 percent say the church should not express their views.

### ***Personal finances and job security***

Generation Nexters say the most pressing problem facing them today is financial issues, including bills, debt and the cost of living. In fact, personal finance, listed as a top concern by 30 percent of Nexters, trumped the 16 percent concerned about



finding a job, career advancement, job security and job satisfaction; health care with 2 percent; and the war in Iraq, the national economy, terrorism, gas prices and politics, which collectively came in last place with 2 percent.

It's crucial for policymakers to know this kind of information, and act on it, according to Dr. Connie Flanagan, professor of youth civic development in the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State.

"Young people aren't disinterested in politics," said Flanagan. "In some ways, it's just a language that we use. I would say they have lots of opinions and are highly interested. If you ask youth if they are concerned with getting a secure job and the benefits that go with that, if they'll be able to pay for health care, they have lots of opinions. They are not only very interested, they are very well-informed."

Forty-six percent of Generation Nexters are still in school, according to the Pew report, so it is likely they have not settled on a career path. Of the 59 percent who are working, only 21 percent say it is very likely they'll stay with their present employer for the rest of their working lives. Seventy-one percent are paid an hourly wage, and only 53 percent of employed Generation Nexters receive health care benefits from their employers. As a whole, only 67 percent of this generation is covered by some form of health insurance.

### **Social Issues**

Issues that divided Americans during the past several elections—including gay marriage and creationism—aren't as controversial for Generation Next.

Sixty-three percent of Generation Nexters believe humans and other living things evolved over time, compared with 47 percent of people ages 41 to 60. Additionally, Gen Nexters are the most likely to believe immigration strengthens American society with 52 percent, followed by the Baby Boomers with 44 percent. Almost six-in-10 Nexters say homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society, and 47 percent favor gay marriage.

"There are real generational differences on social policies and those can be hot button topics in communities, but not as controversial on a college campus," said Shea. "George Will described what young people think about being gay or not gay is either being right or left-handed. I think that's a pretty good point."

### **Getting Generation Next Involved: Tips for Policymakers**

#### **"Engage with Youth, Not for Youth"**

Knowing these traits for Generation Next and brainstorming with legislative staffs on ways to engage with young people is key to getting them involved, Wheeler said.

"The first thing I'd say is to engage young people in issues that matter to them," she said. "The idea is engaging *with* youth, not *for* youth."

Flanagan agrees. "The strategy of the parties has always been to bring out their base, and I can understand why ... for loyalty, et cetera. But young people aren't normally in that base so that strategy automatically cuts Generation Next out," she said.

# Generation Gaps

For the purposes of this article, the following birth years classify the generations:

- Generation Next is made up of 18–25 year olds, born between 1981–1988.
- Generation X was born between 1966–1980 and ranges in age from 26–40.
- Baby Boomers were born from 1946 to 1964 and range in age from 41–60.
- Seniors, born before 1946, are those over 60.

“Start going to them. Almost nobody comes to them and asks what they think.”

Flanagan said there are stereotypes in dealing with young people, as if every meeting must be a social event. But this isn’t the case.

“Treat young people as people with brains, who have opinions. Engage them in face-to-face discussions,” she said. “Meeting face to face can really build trust. Are you talking the talk or really walking the talk.”

Authentic meetings—not meetings that are set up with pre-planned questions and answers—are very important to this generation, Wheeler said.

“The young people of this generation are very savvy,” she said. “Media literacy is very strong. They know when they’re being marketing objects in campaigns. They recognize disingenuous engagement very much faster than other generations. Sometimes they are turned off by politics because the voter is the object rather than the partner.”

According to Shea, election reform options involve policy matters and political parties.

“Same day registration is very important and will work,” he said. “Turnout among younger folks in states with same day registration is dramatically higher. Young people because of their busy lives often miss regular deadlines, but are anxious to vote come Election Day. They are quite mobile and busy with multitasking.”

Hiring young staff members is also crucial.

“Set up partnerships with young people,” said Wheeler. “Look at your own staffs—how you as policymakers do business. Are your advisory structures intergenerational? Do you have an intergenerational staff? Not just interns, but real job tracks for young people.”

Shea agreed. “Give young people positions of responsibility and they will rise to the occasion,” he said. “Just having them to the headquarters or offices to make Xeroxes is not going to cut it.”

Wheeler said engaging with young people will benefit both the legislators and the political process.

“They can bridge gaps across cultures much more easily than older or middle-aged generations,” she said. “They have strengths that generations ahead of them don’t have ... obviously with technology. They excel at things the older generations must

work on a little more, and with incredible energy and hope in possibility.”

## *Make Issues Pertinent to Young People*

Some experts say young people are more interested in global issues than state or local issues, but most agree that politics has a more noticeable effect closer to home.

“The likelihood of people having an effect is much higher locally than federally,” said Flanagan. “Whether it’s in the state or closer to home, you are much more likely to garner change at the state or local level. The news doesn’t educate people as much on those levels.”

Wheeler said young people are a little bit fuzzy on state and national issues, and that could make a difference in their engagement.

“I don’t have any data, but my impression is they are very concrete on local issues and they also get the global issues, but there is a gap with the state and national,” she said. “They can think about global warming and why their creek is polluted. But what the statehouse does about it is foreign.”

To Meg Heubeck, director of instruction of the Youth Leadership Initiative at the University of Virginia, civics education can supplement the media in this respect.

“Social studies is low on the burner,” she said, because its testing is not included in No Child Left Behind. “Our motto here at YLI is civics all year, every year. If you don’t place a value on it, how can you expect young people to take it seriously?”

Heubeck suggests that policymakers get out and go to classrooms.

“Return your mail. Answer your calls,” she said. “If young people come to your office, take a few minutes to listen and pay attention. Share your story about how you got involved. Even if students don’t agree with you, ultimately they respect the fact you are coming in to talk with them.”

## *Get the Party Involved*

Shea says political parties should strive for a greater impact on young people.

“The argument we’ve made is throughout American history, parties have been instrumental in drawing young people and immigrants into the political process,” he said. “Now they’re

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focused on the election at hand, not the long-term. If they were interested in the long-term, they would focus on the youth.”

The Center for Political Participation suggests using different outreach technologies, like networking Web sites such as Facebook and MySpace. A majority of Generation Nexters have used one of these sites, and more than four-in-10 have created personal profiles on them.

“Go to where they are,” Shea said. “If they are on Facebook, the parties need to join that. Don’t expect to draw students out to the party potluck.”

Since members of this generation are active in their communities, combining partisanship with service is another suggestion the center makes. For example, plan an area clean-up event followed by a party picnic. In addition, some party fundraisers are cost-prohibitive to younger voters, so encourage party members to buy extra tickets to fundraisers so students can attend, or allow students free admission for helping with setup.

### Participation: It’s Habit Forming

Shea said students are informed about a lot of issues.

“They have spent a lot of time understanding the dimensions of issues via the Internet and the blogs and social networking and so forth,” he said.

But young voter participation in state elections is not up to par.

“Whereas participation in federal elections is poor among young generations, it’s anemic in state and local elections,” said Shea.

However, there is good news, he said. Working to increase young voter turnout can change the shape of politics because once they start to participate, they won’t stop.

“Students are ready, and once people begin, it’s habitual,” said Shea. “Once they’re pulled into the process, you’ve got them for life.”

—Laura Coleman is associate editor for *State News* magazine.

## Resources

The Pew Generation Next report is available at <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/300.pdf>.

Throwing a Better Party: Local Mobilizing Institutions and the Youth Vote is available at The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement’s (CIRCLE) Web site at [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Working-Papers/Fountain%20Youth\\_CPP.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Working-Papers/Fountain%20Youth_CPP.pdf).

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