What RU Thinking?

RU Voting Focus Group Project

2010-2011

Final Report

by

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RU Voting & the RU Voting Research Group

RU Voting is a nonpartisan effort administered by the Eagleton Institute of Politics. The mission of RU Voting is to prepare and encourage Rutgers students to pay attention to politics, register to vote, and turn out on Election Day. We accomplish this mission by conducting voter registration and mobilization drives; holding public forums and debate watches; and providing voter information to Rutgers students on all campuses via the RU Voting website. RU Voting’s efforts are supported by the Office of the President, the Vice-President for Undergraduate Education, Vice-President for Student Affairs, the New Jersey Education Association, and the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

In the fall of 2010, RU Voting initiated a longitudinal research project regarding the civic and political engagement of Rutgers students. The project was conducted by the RU Voting Research Group, a team of undergraduate researchers led by RU Voting’s project director, Professor Elizabeth Matto. We hope that research conducted this year and in future years will inform RU Voting’s outreach efforts, linking the practice of politics to the study of politics, and serve as an invaluable educational experience for Rutgers students.

The 2010-2011 RU Voting Research Group included:

- Elizabeth C. Matto, Ph.D. – Elizabeth Matto is an Assistant Research Professor at the Eagleton Institute of Politics and the Director of Eagleton’s Youth Political Participation Program (YPPP). As YPPP’s director, Matto is the project director for RU Ready™, a civic engagement initiative administered in New Brunswick High School, and RU Voting. In addition to her research with RU Voting, she is the principal investigator for research associated with RU Ready™ and co-principal investigator is of the research project, “The Classroom-Kitchen Table Connection: The Effects of Political Discussion on Youth Knowledge and Efficacy” funded by The Center for Information and Research on Civic
Learning and Education (CIRCLE). Matto earned her doctorate in American Politics from the George Washington University.

- Bobby Irven, Class of 2011 – Bobby Irven graduated Rutgers University this spring with a double major in political science and Chinese. During his time at Rutgers, Bobby worked with the Aresty Research Center as both a research assistant and a peer advisor and for Eagleton’s RU Ready™ and RU Voting programs. Beginning in the fall of 2011, Bobby will be attending New York University’s Global Affairs Masters Program specializing in international diplomacy.

- Harini Kidambi, Class of 2012 - Harini is a double major in political science through the School of Arts and Sciences and public health through the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, with a minor in South Asian Studies. During the 2010-2011 academic year, Harini held a position as an Aresty research assistant and is an Undergraduate Associate with the Eagleton Institute. Next year, she will serve as RU Voting’s Student Coordinator. After graduation from Rutgers, Harini plans to attend law school.

- Evan Lehrer, Class of 2013 – Evan is a double major in political science and history with a minor in economics. He was an Aresty research assistant during the 2010-2011 academic year and currently interns at Senator Frank Lautenberg’s Office in Newark. Evan plans on attending law school when he graduates from Rutgers University.
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Most importantly, we thank the Rutgers students who participated in the focus groups this fall without whom this research would have been impossible. Thank you for the stimulating discussions and for playing a vital role in initiating this research.
Introduction

The Millennial Generation\(^1\) is approximately 50 million strong and growing in size. Some have predicted that it will exceed the size of the Baby Boom generation (Howe and Strauss 2000, 74), and, thereby, has the potential to significantly impact the course of American democracy. At the same time, we know that Millennials’ attachment to the political process (including voting) is tenuous at best (Zukin et al. 2006). It is these dueling realities that provided the underlying motivation for the project presented in this report – a research effort with practical and educational implications.

The purpose of the research was to revisit, through focus groups of Rutgers students, the outstanding research question lingering in the study of youth participation – What are the contours of engagement among the Millennial Generation? We know that Millennials’ attachment to traditional forms of politics is not dependable while their commitment to volunteering and involvement at the local level remains stable (even during economic hard times). The unanswered question is Do Millennials view traditional political engagement as playing a relevant role in the solution of public problems or has community activity and volunteering taken its place?

With this research, we have begun to shed light on this question by exploring key attitudes impacting engagement. Our research approach and subject matter (youth attitudes) offer then a first step in how we might improve the theoretical framework of youth engagement; ask more

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precise survey questions in future studies; test even better hypotheses; and conduct sound experiments measuring the best methods of outreach.

There also was a practical component to this project. Although stubbornly nonpartisan, we believe that politics matters and that political involvement is important. This is especially true among youth – its size, great ethnic diversity (about 20% are immigrants or children of immigrants\(^2\)), and sizable financial burden it looks forward to carrying upon graduation\(^3\) all give the Millennial Generation a stake in the political process. The impact of the political process can be felt by them now and, therefore, they should be engaged in the political process now. The focus of RU Voting remains to mobilize students to be active citizens, and we hope this research will better inform these outreach efforts.

Finally, the project was meant to be a valuable educational experience for the Rutgers students who were a part of the RU Voting Research Group. The team of undergraduates who participated in this project were involved in every stage of the process including reviewing relevant literature; attaining certification from the Institutional Review Board to conduct research with human subjects; recruiting subjects; administering the focus groups themselves; transcribing and coding qualitative data; and analyzing the results. We hope that student researchers who participate in this project (this year and into the future) will find it to be a valuable way to appreciate firsthand how the study and application of politics intersect.


The object of our attention is *engagement* among youth – it is the behavior we seek to better explain, understand and predict through research and the activity we try to encourage through our outreach. What do we mean by *engagement*? Engagement is multi-faceted and can take on various forms:

- **Cognitive** – Cognitive engagement involves paying attention to what is going on in politics and takes on such forms as reading the newspaper, watching the news on television, or even discussing politics.
- **Political** – Political or electoral engagement refers to those activities undertaken to affect the makeup of government such as voting, making campaign contributions to candidates, or volunteering for a campaign.
- **Expressive** – This form of engagement involves trying to affect the actions of government by speaking out either by contacting officials, protesting, boycotting, or boycotting.
- **Civic** – This behavior involves trying to improve the community in which one lives by working on your own or with others directly. This might involve volunteering for a group, forming your own group, or fundraising for a cause.

In his study of the quality and quantity of engagement among Americans in *Bowling Alone* (2002), Robert Putnam sounded an alarm about youth’s apparent disconnection from their communities. In comparing young people to older age cohorts, Putnam claimed “It is as though the post-war generations were exposed to some anti-civic X-ray that permanently and increasingly rendered them less likely to connect with the community” (Putnam 2000, 255).

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5 These various forms of engagement are specified in Zukin et al. 2006, Table 3.1, 57-58.
Subsequent works have countered Putnam’s contention. In *A New Engagement?* (2006), Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Carpini suggest that engagement among the Millennial Generation is different from previous generations . . . not nonexistent. They hold that it’s not so much that young people are disconnected from their communities but they are connected differently. According to the authors, youths have placed their emphasis on volunteering and service (the civic strain of engagement defined above) and are less connected to such traditional forms of political engagement as voting and demonstrating an interest in politics (the cognitive, political, and expressive methods).

A national focus group project conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) (Kiesa et al. 2007) offered a similar assessment arguing that Millennials:

- are more engaged in their communities than the generation that preceded them – Generation X.
- like to be involved locally but are disengaged from formal politics.
- don’t see voting as effective way of prompting change and see politics as “inefficient and difficult”.

Arguably the most traditional form of political engagement is voting. It is this form of engagement that highlights the stark contrast between Millennials and older generations. For example, in 2008, voter turnout among 18-29 year olds was at its nearly highest level (51.1%) since the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1972. Still, turnout rates in 2008 among young people lagged approximately 17 percentage points behind voters 30 years and older (voter turnout rates in 2008 among over 30 voters was 67%). Slight downturns in youth voter turnout for the 2009 governors’ races in New Jersey, Virginia, and Massachusetts and the 2010 midterm elections underscore the weak connection of young people to the voting process.

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6 For more information on youth voter turnout rates, see http://www.civicyouth.org/ResearchTopics/research-topics/political-participation-and-voting/
By contrast, Millennials lead other age cohorts when it comes to volunteering. The 2009 Civic Health Index released by the National Conference on Citizenship found that, despite the recent economic downturn, the youngest cohort out-paced Generation Xers, Baby Boomers, and those 65 or older when it came to volunteering.7

This schism seems to be reflected now in youth attitudes towards political activity versus civic activity or volunteering. When young people were asked in a survey conducted by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University in fall 2008 whether they found getting involved in politics honorable, 64% of 18-29 years olds surveyed agreed that political involvement was honorable. Similarly, 68% agreed that running for office was an honorable thing to do.8

By 2010, these percentages had reversed. In 2010, when asked whether they found getting involved in politics honorable, only 31% of 18-29 years olds answered affirmatively.9 Similarly, only 35% respondents answered that running for office was an honorable thing to do. In both surveys (2008 and 2010), a majority of respondents deemed community service honorable (although there was a decline in the percentage - 89% in 2008 to 70% in 2010). These findings were buttressed with data gathered by the IOP in the spring of 2011.10

Such results heighten our interest in the research question left unanswered by Zukin et al. Specifically, have young people begun to view community involvement or civic engagement as a more desirable route for solving public problems than the use of political and expressive methods of engagement, addressing societal issues by taking action to shape the makeup of government and influence these officials? To put it more succinctly, has civic engagement, thereby, become a substitute for political behavior?

Our next consideration then is the factors that influence the contours of youth engagement – civic, political, or both. From previous research, we know that there are many variables that might affect a young person’s behavior whether it is their propensity to vote and/or volunteer.

These factors include:

- their socioeconomic background & their level of education or skills (Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes 1960; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980)
- the extent to which they have been mobilized by political parties, campaigns, or other groups to involve themselves in the political or civic process (Green and Gerber 2008; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993)
- the political socialization they have experience either by parents, school, the media, etc.

In this project, we are focusing our attention on the role of attitudes. There is plenty of research that demonstrates that attitudes matter and that they influence behavior. For example, we know that such attitudes as efficacy (sense of confidence that one is prepared to participate in political process and that government is responsive) (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes 1960; Moe 1980) and civic duty (Campbell et al 1960; Riker and Ordeshook 1968) affect the nature and intensity of involvement. In the model of engagement Zukin et al. constructed (2007), they found that a person’s outlook, their sense of connection to the political process, and their sense that politics matters had a strong effect on the quality and quantity of their engagement.

There is plenty left to learn regarding youth attitudes towards civic and political engagement and, ultimately, their connection to youth behavior. First, of the existing research, some surprising and counterintuitive findings have emerged on the subject. In addition to the reversal in sentiments regarding honorability reported above, Zukin et al. found that negative feelings towards politics among youth actually encouraged rather than thwarted political
engagement. Better understanding these attitudes and their potential ramifications then is important before we can study with confidence the best ways to encourage behavior.

Second, we know that a few key attitudes among youths differ starkly from older generations. Civic duty is a striking example. In their research, Zukin et al. found that Baby Boomers and pre-Baby boomers believe that there are obligations or duties associated with being a good citizen (such as voting or staying informed) while younger generations view such activities as choices rather than responsibilities. As we know, voter turnout rates between these generations differ markedly. In light of these generational contrasts, better understanding of the contours of these attitudes and their links to behavior among Millennials becomes even more important if we hope to engage youth in all forms of engagement.

Third, the Millennial Generation is a generation in progress. It still isn’t clear whether their attitudes and behavior are a function of their stage in life or of their generation. Consequently, it is important to continue to explore and refine our appreciation of their attitudes and behavior. As the generation ages, we may see some of these behaviors in question shift with Millennials beginning to embrace those types of political action pursued by older generation (this would lend support to the argument that Millennials are “growing out” of those attitudes and behaviors identified in the last five years or so). On the other hand, if Millennials continue to exhibit less dependence on political and expressive engagement (the ballot box and the bullhorn so to speak), then we will be in a stronger position to state that there are traits inherent to this generation which not only need understood but addressed effectively if we want to ensure the health of American democracy.
Methodology

Approach

We pursued a qualitative methodological approach in addressing our research questions – focus groups of Rutgers students. Qualitative research seeks to better understand behavior, civic and political behavior in this case, from the perspective of the subjects themselves. It is exploratory and descriptive allowing researchers to gather details and impressions that can’t be gathered from surveys. Inductive in nature, qualitative research uses the impressions of subjects, among other things, to construct hypotheses and ultimately build a “grounded theory” (Bogdan and Biklan 2007; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Merriam 2009).

Given our subject matter, this was a useful approach. The focus group structure allowed us to clarify troubling or confusing findings revealed via survey research such as those uncovered in the IOP research regarding the honorability of participation. Also, as stated above, the Millennial Generation is a generation in progress – there is much that is still unknown. It is challenging to test theories of youth engagement when the causal connections are unclear as of yet. Given some marked contrasts between young generations and older generations, the same theories of engagement may not hold true. Rather than simply shake our proverbial heads in disgust at youths’ apparent disconnection from political life, the more productive approach is to better understand their attitudes and their impact on behavior so we can get about the business of encouraging their active involvement in the political process.

Sample

The population we sought to approximate in selecting our sample was undergraduates attending Rutgers University on the New Brunswick campus full-time. In recruiting students,
we used a selection of incentives including a $25 RU Express Card and food & drinks at the focus groups themselves. 11

In gathering subjects, we followed a three-pronged recruitment approach:

• On various days & at various times, the research team went to high traffic areas around campus and approached every other student who passed asking if they would like to participate in the focus group. Students were provided a flyer listing the purpose of the project, dates of the focus groups, and incentives provided (a copy of the flyer is included in the appendix).

• The research team also placed advertisements in prominent or highly visible locations such as *The Daily Targum*, Rutgers University’s daily newspaper, and various campus listservs.

• The research team received approval from the University’s Institute for Research and Planning to attain a random selection of email addresses of undergraduates to whom we sent an email (with the flyer attached) inviting them to participate.

A total of five focus groups were conducted between October 18 - November 1, 2010. Each focus group lasted from 1 to 2 hours and was held on different days, at different times, & on different campuses. The principal investigator, Professor Elizabeth Matto, played the lead role in administering the focus group, and student researchers were given opportunities throughout to lead portions under her supervision. Each focus group was video and audio taped and students assigned themselves a pseudonym that we utilized through focus group. The research team followed a basic outline of questions that explored the nature of subjects’ civic and political engagement as well as the factors influencing this engagement – with a special emphasis on their outlook and attitudes (see Appendix for focus group guide).

11 This research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Rutgers University, Protocol #E10-295.
Our ultimate sample consisted of 40 subjects. In composing our sample, we wanted to approximate the demographics of undergraduate population of New Brunswick with special attention to

- gender
- ethnic background
- field of study

Students were asked to provide this demographic information in writing when they checked in at the focus group. A comparison of our sample to demographic information available from the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning website (retrieved March, 2011) suggests that our sample accurately reflected the demographics of the campus (see Tables 1 & 2).

- Regarding gender, 50.45% of students enrolled on the New Brunswick campus are women and 49.55% are men. Although the gender difference was more pronounced, our research sample also contained a larger percentage of women than men.

- Regarding ethnicity, the largest percentage of students on the New Brunswick campus identify themselves as White (50%), followed by Asian (25%), followed by Latino (11%), and African American (8%). This ethnic breakdown was reflected in our sample with most identifying themselves as White (40%), followed by Asian (30%), followed by African American and Latino (12.5%).

- Regarding field of study, as documented in Table 2, most students at Rutgers University are either “Undeclared”/“Undecided” regarding a field of study or have declared Business as a field of study. These were not the top percentages in our sample. We think there is a good reason for this difference. At Rutgers University, students are not required to declare a major until the start of their junior year. Our sample contained 27 juniors, seniors, and 5th year students, and we believe that explains our small number of “undeclared” subjects. Regarding the preponderance of business majors in the Rutgers
population (and not our sample), the data available regarding field of study includes all three Rutgers campuses – Camden, Newark, and New Brunswick. We attribute the difference between our sample and the population to the fact that a large number of business majors are located on the Newark campus but only New Brunswick students were included in our sample.

Data Analysis

The research team followed the “constant comparative” method of data analysis commonly used with qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklan 2007; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Merriam 2009) and analysis took place from December 2010-March 2011:

- **December**
  - The research team open-coded all of the audio files
  - This process offered an opportunity for all members of the research team to hear all of the focus groups and begin the process of creating a rudimentary category scheme
  - For each focus group, each researcher created an individual excel spreadsheet for each question in which we recorded our initial impressions of the responses
- **January-February**
  - Each researcher was assigned different units to consider (i.e. civic duty, honorability of politics) and transcribed those units for each focus group
- **February**
  - Each researcher open-coded (electronically) those units he or she transcribed
  - With this open-coding, each researcher constructed an inductive category system for the qualitative data gathered for that unit of study
  - Using excel, researchers sorted the qualitative data into the categories & sub-categories they constructed
- **March**
  - All researchers revised categories as necessary
• All data was re-coded collectively and by Professor Matto individually
• During this stage of the analysis, the research team found themselves moving from an inductive to a deductive process - reaching the point of saturation in which we attained consistent responses from subjects
• With coding completed, the research team drew conclusions and prepared our presentation of findings.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} The RU Voting Research Group presented findings from their research on March 28, 2011 at the Eagleton Institute of Politics. The audiofile of this presentation can be found on the Eagleton Institute’s website: http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/programs/yppp/WhatRUThinking.php
Findings

Operating under the assumption that attitudes play an influential role in the nature of youth behavior in their communities and the political sphere (although for reasons specified earlier, exactly what these attitudes look like and how they affect behavior is still an open question), we used these focus groups as an opportunity to explore subjects’ thoughts about politics and public officials; the role of politics and the community; and their responsibilities as citizens. In our analysis, we considered how consistent responses were to previous research on the subject and what light they shed on the research question regarding the contours of youth engagement.

Engagement, Now and Future

We began each focus group trying to get a sense of students’ current level of political activity and community involvement. We also asked them to envision what their level of engagement would be once they had graduated from college.

When it came to volunteering, we found that large numbers of students have engaged in volunteering activities in both high school and college. To be sure, students indicated that, both in high school and college, their participation in such activities was spurred primarily by their genuine interest or concern for a cause. A larger number indicated that their volunteer actions in high school were pursued with college applications in mind and that their college activities have been either a function of their membership in a club (such as a fraternity or sorority); a college course for which they are earning credit; or to enhance their resume and improve their employment opportunities.

A few indicated that lack of time made it nearly impossible to squeeze volunteering into their schedules and that incentives play a key role in encouraging such civic behavior. One student noted,
“I feel like people look badly on incentives to do this kind of thing. I feel like our time is so valuable now that we don’t have a lot of it that we need an incentive to do something.”

When asked about current political activities, most indicated that their political activities revolved around staying aware and informed about what’s going on in politics either by reading the newspaper, reading the news online, listening to the radio, or reading The Daily Targum. A good number of students indicated that they also have spent time, either in college or in high school, volunteering for various campaigns through canvassing and other campaign-related activities.

Most students reported that, looking ahead to the future, they believed they would be engaged adults – either when they owned a home, had children, were financially secure, were more settled. The implicit assumption among many of the respondents was that they would have more of a stake in the political process at that point,

“When you’re older you may own a house and then you would pay property taxes in New Jersey and then when you have a voice in your community . . . that’s what property taxes in New Jersey are used for . . . for schools and so on . . . I feel like it would be more real for me.”

These findings underscore the importance of incentives in motivating behavior among youth. Certainly, the connection between incentives (material, solidary, and purposive) and engagement is well-established in the academic literature (Wilson 1995) and, as one student clearly stated, a necessary component for motivating action. Among citizens of all ages, a cost-benefit analysis takes place in which the costs of participating (time, energy, etc.) are weighed against the benefits (course credit, job prospects, overall well-being) of engagement.

Service-learning programs have become a popular tack for encouraging civic engagement in both high school and college and influence this cost-benefit analysis among young people. Most
likely due to concerns regarding partisanship, less prevalent are programs that link political participation to organizational or course requirements. Although service-learning experiences have value, it should be noted that young people active in volunteer work often overlook the link between such service and the political process (Boyt 2004) and that such community work doesn’t necessarily spark political participation (Galston 2001). Service-learning isn’t enough then to encourage political participation. Students’ perception that politics will “be more real” to them when they own a home or have children further highlights the fact that, in this calculation of cost and benefit, youth often don’t make the connection between their immediate condition or well-being and political participation. This is an especially interesting finding given that Rutgers is a public institution that has faced considerable budget cuts in recent years a reality that certainly affects the daily life of college students.

Feelings About Politics

In each focus group, the research subjects were asked ‘What words or thoughts come to mind when you hear the word “politics”’. This is a question that was asked in recent national qualitative and quantitative studies of youth participation (Kiesa et al. 2007; Zukin et al. 2006) and is meant to gather general impressions of the subject of politics.

Using a similar coding scheme as Zukin et al. (2007), we found that responses to this question fell into four distinct categories:

- **Positive** - These responses suggest that subjects view the political process in a positive light – mostly because they consider politics intellectually stimulating. Words that came to mind for subjects whose responses were categorized as positive were “good hearted conversation”, “interesting”, “diversity of opinion”. A relatively small number of responses fell into this category.
• **Neutral** - A large number of students’ responses fell under the category we named neutral.\(^{13}\) Responses were placed in this category if they were neither obviously positive nor negative. We further divided this category into two sub-categories:
  - Textbook - These responses entailed “textbook” descriptions of American democracy such as “government, constitution” or “President, government, democracy”.
  - Sovereignty - These responses, such as “picking your government, choosing your future”, also were descriptive in nature but made reference to the popular sovereignty inherent in the American system of government. Zukin et al. categorized such responses as neutral as we have done, but a good argument could be made that responses that call attention to the power of citizens might rightly be classified as positive.

• **Negative** – A comparatively large number of responses fell into this category and can be further categorized (with key descriptive phrases included):
  - Uncivil - “Critical, nonsensical debates”, “arguing”, “fighting”
  - Dishonest/corrupt - “lies”, “corruption”
  - Selfishly motivated - “money, power, influence, done”
  - “Crowd pleasing” - “putting on a face, acting”, “be a rock star”

• **Other** – This last category contained responses that suggested a distance or sense of removal from traditional politics. Sub-categories (with key phrases) include responses that suggest that politics excludes people or that is just so complicated that it is out of reach.
  - Exclusionary - “closed doors”, “doesn’t help everyone”
  - Cumbersome – “bunch of hoops to go through”, “it’s all bureaucracy”

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\(^{13}\) Zukin et al. 2006 referred to this category as “descriptive”.
So what do we make of these findings? Most of the responses of our subjects fell under the negative category, corruption in particular. This contrasts with Zukin’s research (the most thorough recent study of youth) in which most response fell under the category neutral. The negativity of our subjects to the idea of politics certainly isn’t surprising given current survey data and the overall mood of the country.

Furthermore, a preponderance of negative responses isn’t necessarily a sign that such students are hostile to political participation. In fact, in their research, Zukin et al. found (perhaps counter to our intuition) that it was those youths who offered responses that could be categorized as neutral or negative who were most likely to engage in traditional forms of politics. This finding parallels research demonstrating that cohorts that possess lower levels of external political efficacy or a weak sense that government is responsive to their concerns (African Americans in particular) often are more likely to engage in expressive forms of political participation (Shingles 1981).

On the discouraging side, a good number of students offered responses that fell under the other category suggestive that they believe that the political process is somehow removed from them. It is these students who tend to be less likely to participate in the political process. On the bright side, we did not find in response to this question (as Zukin did) that students felt excluded for socioeconomic reasons - that politics was for the rich, etc. This may be a reflection of the diversity of the Millennial Generation as a whole and the Rutgers community in particular. If feelings of exclusion are the result of a political system that seems confusing and cumbersome, that offers the hope that, with the right guidance and information, the process can be more welcoming.
Civic Duty

Classic political science research has identified a link between a sense of civic duty and civic action (Campbell, Converse, Miller, Stokes 1960; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). As indicated earlier, recent national research by Zukin et al. (2006) found generational differences (and differing effects) when it came to civic duty with older generations identifying active, positive duties associated with citizenship and younger citizens taking a more passive stance. Our research uncovered a few key similarities and few key differences with these findings.

Participants in our focus groups were asked, “Are there any duties associated with citizenship?” and responses fell into four basic categories:

- **Traditional Duties** – Some of the responses suggested that students believed there to be some responsibilities that might be considered traditional methods of political, civic, and expressive in nature.
  - **Vote/Vote in Important Elections/Speak Out** – Responses in this category included “How many countries let you vote for a President?”, “Speak up if I don’t like something that’s going on.”
  - **Volunteer/Military Service** – “Definitely think for one to fight when called upon”
  - **Pick Up the Slack for Government** – When government is unable to perform certain functions, these responses suggest that the people must step in, by working in their communities, to meet needs unmet by government.

- **Be Aware**
  - **Keep an Eye on the Government** – Some responses suggested that it was the responsibility of citizens living in a representative democracy to play the role, in effect, of a government watchdog, “Your responsibility to check up on the leaders”.
  - **Be Informed** – These responses underscored the importance some subjects placed on keeping up with what’s going on in the world of politics and going into the
voting booth well-informed, “Know the candidates, what the issues are, and their stances on the issues”.

- **Be a Good Person** – Some responses reflected the more passive conception of citizenship uncovered in previous research in which being a good person equates with being a good citizen.
  - **Do Your Job** – Some responses reflected a fairly basic threshold for good citizenship and involved “working an honest job, going to college” and “Paying taxes in April”.
  - **Contribute to Society** – Some respondents raised the bar of citizenship somewhat and asserted that the notion of being a good person involved being “a functional member of society” and that citizens were “expected at least to be contributing something” to their community (although how that was conceptualized was not altogether clear).
  - **Respect Others** – Respecting other cultures and other genders was another manifestation of being a good person and, thereby, being a good citizen.

- **No Duties, It Varies** – Others stated that there were no inherent duties to being a citizen or, if there were, they did not involve specific activities or they varied according to circumstances.
  - **No Duties** – Some respondents stated definitively that citizenship did not entail any inherent responsibilities, “No explicit duties, never spelled out to you”, “If there were, you would be punished if you didn’t”.
  - **No Specific Duties** – Some respondents clarified that there were no specific duties to do such things as vote, speak out, or volunteer with one respondent suggesting that acting out of duty wasn’t necessarily the best way to proceed, “voting for the sake of voting, is that the right thing to do?”
  - **Varies** – “I think it’s different for every individual” sums up the tenor of responses in this category.
Responses were fairly well-distributed among these categories with the most cited responses including

- voting is specifically a duty
- duty to be informed
- duty to be a functional member of society

Our research then revealed some similarities and some key differences with Zukin’s conclusions. In that 2006 study, the researchers found that younger subjects overwhelmingly cited “being a good person” or “being a functioning member of society” as their primary duties as citizens. Being informed was not commonly identified as a duty among the youngest age cohort in that research.

Responses in our study show a mixture of traditional cognitive, expressive, and political duties and the more passive notion of “be a good person”. Obviously, we can’t state definitely that this marks a change in youth in general since the last major study was conducted or if these are attitudes unique to Rutgers students in the fall of 2010. It does put our subjects more in line with the attitudes of older generations who have a higher propensity to engage in traditional forms of engagement.

Honorable of Politics

As stated earlier, the drastic shift in attitudes among young people towards the honorability of political involvement and community service was a motivating factor in our research in that, among other things, it underscored the possibility that young people were turning away from traditional political action in favor of community action. A summary of these results (gathered by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University) can be found in Table 3 and show a decline in a sense that political activity and running for office is an “honorable” thing to do while
community involvement (although there has been some decline since 2008) is viewed as a much more “honorable” activity.

Obviously, our research can’t explain why these numbers declined in recent years. Through conversations with our subjects though, we can gain at least a better understanding of what factors determine their sentiments regarding the honorability of each form of engagement. Interestingly, these conversations revealed that the intention of the individual engaged in the action in question (whether it is political or civic action) plays a key role in students’ thinking regarding the honorability of the action. It also suggests, back to our original research question, that students still believe that the political process plays a relevant role in the lives of citizens.

In our focus groups, students were asked “Do you think volunteering or civic action is honorable?” Likewise, we asked “Do you think that participating in politics is honorable?” Given the intersection between the honorability of an action and the intention behind the action in the minds of research subjects, we plotted responses to these questions across two dimensions – the intention of the actor (y axis) and the resulting honorability of the action (x axis). The number of dots in each quadrant represents the number of responses that fell into that category (please see Figures 1 and 2).

**Honorability of Civic Engagement**

The subject of the intention behind one’s volunteer activity came up frequently in different segments of the focus groups (not just around this topic). As discussed earlier, students often mentioned how such incentives as strengthening college applications and gaining future employment motivated their involvement in volunteer activities (although there were plenty of students who engaged in volunteer activities just for the purpose of doing good).
Even when the motives behind volunteering were not necessarily pure, subjects believed that the activity itself was still honorable (see lower right quadrant of Figure 1). For example, one student stated,

“Like when you do it, I hope that everyone does it with 100% of their effort, so since the result is coming out, you have to consider that hey they’re putting their time even though it’s not enjoyed but the result, the product is being achieved.”

Along these same lines, another student stated,

“I think that overall, any community service that’s done for whatever reason, the end result is always a good thing”.

We did have some students who suggested that volunteer activities done for purely selfish reasons render the activity itself dishonorable (see lower left quadrant of Figure 1). One student stated,

“Like you’re just trying to volunteer to get ahead, it’s almost like you’re using the people that need your help and you’re not invested in it and like if it wasn’t helping you then you would drop it, you know?“.

Although the difference isn’t great, more students still seemed to support the idea that impure intention doesn’t affect the overall honorability of the activity (demonstrated by the number of responses in the lower right quadrant of Figure 1 compared to the lower left quadrant).

Finally, we had a few students who suggested that, even when one’s intentions are good, volunteering isn’t necessarily honorable because it relieves the government of a burden they should be bearing,
“I think that you’re, by volunteering and taking care of some of the issues that I feel may be the government should be taking care of you sort of umm aren’t holding them accountable to do what they should be doing.”

Honourability of Political Engagement (Figure 2)

Again, intention seemed to have a significant impact on students’ assessment of whether political action was honourable. This stands in sharp contrast to students’ attitudes regarding volunteering. It should be noted that these discussions tended to involve the intentions of those running for office not necessarily the average citizen involved in political activities.

According to our research subjects, political engagement is considered honourable only when it is done with pure intentions and is pursued to address important issues that mean something to that politician or individual (upper-right quadrant of Figure 2). As one student stated,

“I believe it is honourable to run for political office and you know and hold political office as long as you know what you stand for and you know you’re not willing to give up.”

Such political action was viewed among research subjects as visionary or a sign of leadership that was likely to bring about real change.

Unlike discussion of volunteering, politics is never considered honourable when the intentions of political actors are impure (lower-right quadrant of Figure 2). We have two interesting findings here – most students assume that politicians’ motives are dishonorable and these impure motives automatically render their actions dishonorable. This idea was expressed by a few students,

“I think all these people who are involved and get into office and it really just becomes a job to them and it’s not anymore about changing the system.”
“There are the people who want to join politics purely for the power involved and I feel like if you’re doing it for the honor involved that’s a very dishonorable motive.”

Even when individuals run for office with pure intentions, there is an assumption that they will eventually become more and more selfish and, thereby, their actions become dishonorable (see upper left quadrant of Figure 2).

What overall conclusions can we draw from the discussion of honorability and engagement? The information we gathered has value in that it sheds light on a subject that has received little attention thus far in the literature – the notion of honorability. This exploration suggests that an understanding of honorability hinges on subjects’ perceptions of an actor’s intention. Here then we see the value of qualitative research and its ability to make sense of troubling survey results.

What do we know about the notion of intent? Zukin et al (2006) do reference opinions on the motivations of public officials and found that youth generally were cynical and disillusioned by officials. This feeling certainly seemed to reflect our subjects’ views of public officials. It is important to note, though, that some of our subjects did believe that there were some public officials, more often local officials, who were not motivated by purely selfish reasons. The overall negative sentiments though are in line with those discussed earlier – the preponderance of responses to the question ‘What words come to mind when you hear the word “politics”?‘ that were negative in nature.

As stated earlier, those with negative sentiments aren’t necessarily predetermined to be disengaged in the political process. In fact, responses to these questions regarding honorability seem to suggest that young people continue to believe the political process has a relevant role in their lives.

14 Probably the closest attitude to “honorability” would be trust in local and federal government – a subject that has received a good deal of scholarly attention.
The underlying feeling that political engagement done for the wrong reasons is dishonorable (unlike community service done for the wrong reason) seemed to be based on the fact that politics has a greater impact on society than community service,

“... you’re affecting much more people than helping out a few people making sandwiches in a soup kitchen. The impact is much higher, you’re affect hundreds of people not just a couple thousand, hundreds of thousands.”

“The intent’s not so important with community service because there really are no consequences for having bad intent doing community service and doing something good, when you run for office you have bad intent, there are consequences to not kind of following through, like if you’re running with that bad intent that’s going to carry over into your actual kind, when you’re actually in office you’re gonna do things in a corrupt way, you’re gonna take money from people, and there’s major consequences in having that money while you’re in a position of such power.”

Not every student stated this so this is only a tentative conclusion. As such, it deserves more study. It does suggest though that students recognize a role for politics – a role that is more broad than community involvement, and shows that while subjects emphasize the importance of pure intentions in political involvement, that this in many ways is propelled by the fact that they believe that politics has a greater impact than volunteering or civic engagement.

**Connection Between Political and Civic Engagement**

We end by zeroing in on our overriding research question of young people’s connection to politics and volunteering. We asked students “If there was a problem or issue you cared about, what would be the best way to address it or to solve it?” As an example, we often would ask – “Imagine you cared about the issue of homelessness, what would be the best way to go about solving it – working at the community level (i.e. Elijah’s Promise) or working through the
political process to address the problem?” These questions were meant to elicit students’ sentiments regarding the relevance of politics vs. working directly in one’s community.

Responses fell into three overall categories:

- **Solve problems by working through the political process** – Responses within this category suggested that politics has a great impact and is effective for larger projects; there are greater resources within the political process; and that volunteering is disheartening.

- **Solve problems by working on them directly, in the community** - Responses suggesting that civic engagement is preferable cited that the political process is disheartening and discouraging (this was the most cited response to this question); that volunteering is quicker and feels good; and that volunteering is most effective for small projects.

- **Connection Between the Political and the Civic** – Some responses made it clear that solutions to public problems don’t lie in one realm or the other. The second most cited response to this question was that public issues often initiate at the local level and evolve into politics.

What do we take away from this analysis? We found overwhelming support for the notion that volunteering is a better option than politics. Students found politics very disheartening where they found volunteering edifying. This certainly supports the idea that young people are distancing themselves from politics in favor of community involvement.

However, there also was strong support for the idea that volunteering or working at the grassroots level/the micro level has limited effects and that such work will ascend and become political eventually,

“... grassroots movements turn in to affecting politics. You start off in a small group like if my town had an issue then surrounding towns might have the issue, and become a county issue. Start from one group of people and come together in that then it sort of fixed like a ripple effect.”
This certainly suggests the relevance, even the necessity, of politics is in the minds of youth.
Conclusions/Implications

As indicated at the outset, we believe there is good reason for young people to be involved in all forms of engagement – cognitive, political, expressive, and civic – and that this engagement should take place today. Ideally, efforts to mobilize such activity should be evidenced-based. Up to this point, RU Voting’s outreach efforts have been informed by existing research indicating that making contact with potential voters and easing the burden of gathering registration information and poll locations increase the likelihood of participation.

We know that attitudes also affect behavior. What is not altogether clear is the nature of youth’s attitudes towards the various forms of engagement; how these attitudes affect their behavior; and how best to reach out to students in light of this information. But we’ve taken a good first step with this project.

Based on our research, we know that

- the burdens of engaging in the political process don’t outweigh the costs for subjects (unlike civic engagement).
- there is a lot of negativity towards politics and public officials among young people.
- in addition to viewing “being a good person” as a prerequisite for good citizenship, voting and being informed are considered civic duties.
- feelings that politics is dishonorable compared to volunteering seem to have to do mainly with negative view of politicians and their motives.

To be sure, we know that negativity towards politics and politicians is not unique to young people. We also have reason to believe that it does not doom either current or future
engagement. We also see that, at least among our subjects, such traditional forms of political
and cognitive engagement are viewed as keys to good citizenship.

Zeroing in on our research question, we also know that

- the political process is viewed as having broad and substantial effects.
- the political process is considered the best way to address large-scale public needs.

The qualitative data we’ve gathered through these focus groups provide a rich description
of students’ attitudes or a window into their perceptions of the relevance of engagement of
all sorts. This is a first step towards building an accurate model of engagement among the
Millennial Generation. What are the next steps?

There are limits of course to the generalizability of the qualitative data we’ve gathered.
Fortunately, as a result of our membership in a consortium of colleges and universities15,
similar data has been gathered at three other campuses (Franklin and Marshall College,
University of Florida, University of Tennessee at Knoxville) that will allow us to compare
the descriptions provided by Rutgers students to other students. Like our data, this
information will provide guidance (from the subjects themselves) as to how to best explain
youth attitudes and predict how they will affect behavior. Furthermore, the information we
gathered this year can be further refined in another round of focus groups on the Rutgers,
New Brunswick campus planned for Fall 2012.

The qualitative data gathered from these focus groups will prove valuable for formulating
questions to include in future survey instruments. Students’ discussions will determine to a
great extent the sort of questions we will pose and how we will pose them. For example, we
saw that students’ feelings towards politics fell into four overall categories – negative,
textbook, positive, and other. In the future, we might ask students to indicate the degree to

15 The Eagleton Institute of Politics is a member of the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement, a consortium of
college and universities from around the country maintained by the Institute of Politics, Harvard University,
http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Programs/National-Campaign.
which they believe that politics involves “good hearted discussion” on one end of continuum to “incivility” on the other end of the continuum. Similarly, regarding civic duty, we might ask students in a survey, “Which of the following (“being a good person”, “being informed”, etc.) are duties of citizenship? Measuring these attitudes in a way that is reflective of students’ discussions is an important step in building a “grounded theory” of youth engagement.

Another equally important step is determining the effect of these attitudes on youth behavior. Specifically, what is the relationship between various attitudes (i.e. negativity towards politics or belief that “being a good person” equals civic duty) and the type of engagement one pursues or doesn’t pursue (cognitive, political, expressive, and civic). It is by formulating and testing hypotheses regarding the connection between the two that will allow us to more acutely appreciate the theoretical framework of youth engagement and build an accurate model of the phenomenon.

Fortunately, some data are available to us that will allow us to begin this process. The Institute of Politics has made the data set from their most recent survey (March 2011) available to RU Voting. Although not all of the attitudes and behaviors we discussed in the focus groups are represented in this survey, we will be able to explore the relationship of various attitudes to various forms of engagement. Clearly, the next best step will be to construct our own survey instrument and field it in a representative sample of Rutgers students and, eventually, students nationwide.

Finally, a better appreciation of the subject of youth engagement is useful in that it offers an opportunity to test, and ultimately pursue, best methods of mobilization. Specifically, we might use this understanding as a starting point for quasi-experiments that measure which forms of outreach are most effective given the attitudes of youth. Quantitative research (rooted in the qualitative research we have and will continue to conduct) may provide us
with a clearer picture of youths’ sense of civic duty and the connection to behavior. With that information, we might design an experiment that delivers different messages regarding one’s duty to vote (either through a PSA, posters, Internet advertisements) and measure which is the most successful method for encouraging voting.

Better understanding of youth engagement and the attitudes underlying it also heighten the need for including efforts in curricula (at Eagleton specifically and Rutgers University as a whole) that lessen the burden and increase the benefits of political activity. “Service learning” is a promising method utilized in educational institutions, including Rutgers University, and is designed to encourage public service through volunteering. “Civic learning” programs are less prevalent and involve fostering skills needed to promote change through the political process. Clearly, such programs come with their own special set of problems – specifically the role of the University or a nonpartisan Institute such as Eagleton maintaining its appropriate role. Some models exist and are beginning to be studied for their effectiveness (see Bardwell 2011). Given our findings regarding the critical role of incentives, it seems a worthwhile avenue to pursue.
References


### Table 1

**Gender and Ethnicity, Population and Sample**

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<th>Gender</th>
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<th>Focus Group %</th>
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*Other includes multi-race/ethnicity & unknown

Source: Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning, Rutgers University
Table 2
Field of Study, Population and Sample

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Notes:

Rutgers does not provide data for field of study for the New Brunswick campus alone (data includes Camden and Newark campuses). Large number of students pursuing Business as a field of study for the study population (and not sample population) due in large part to inclusion of such students.

Rutgers University requires students to declare a field of study by the beginning of the Junior year. Our sample contained a majority of Juniors, Seniors, and 5th year students and, thereby, explains the relatively few numbers of undeclared students in our sample.

The total number of subjects listed as 53 in the column entitled Focus Group # reflects the fact that we counted double majors for each relevant field of study.
Table 3

Honorability of Political and Civic Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>HONORABILITY OF POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT (%)</th>
<th>HONORABILITY OF RUNNING FOR OFFICE (%)</th>
<th>HONORABILITY OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (%)</th>
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<td>2011</td>
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*This data was not gathered in the Spring 2011 survey.
Figure 1

Honorability of Volunteering/Civic Engagement

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

“It might seem small but they made headlines for a reason, you know, I definitely admire, and definitely think it’s honorable.”

“I think that you’re, by volunteering and taking care of some of the issues that I feel may be the government should be taking care of you sort of umm aren’t holding them accountable to do what they should be doing.”

“The other thing is community is more local and if everyone is working within their local area to better themselves, then I mean in theory, all across the nation it’ll make the whole nation better”

HONORABLE

“I think it’s still honorable, I mean you’re still doing it. Do you have the right intention? No, but you’re still helping.”

“The thing with community service is that you actually are helping people with the community people so as long as you’re helping people it’s honorable. It’s less honorable if your motives are bad but it’s still honorable if you’re doing something to make a change in your community.”

“I personally think that community service is a very honorable thing, I don’t necessarily like the idea that we write it on our college applications and write it on our resumes, I don’t necessarily think that’s going to be a telltale about what your character is, but then again I still find it to be a very honorable thing even if we do have to do it as a requirement.”

“Like when you do it, I hope that everyone does it with 100% of their effort, so since the result is coming out, you have to consider that hey they’re putting their time even though it’s not enjoyed but the result, the product is being achieved.”

“I really think the end product is a lot more important than the intent just because people have so many different reasons for getting into it, there are so many different motivations for it”

“I think that overall, any community service that’s done for whatever reason, the end result is always a good thing”

“You always need that incentive but as long as you have an incentive that makes you get involved in something, and something that you always wanted to do but never had the spark to do it, everyone benefits from it”

PURE

“It’s like a respectable thing to do but at the same time it’s like everyone should be doing it anyway so maybe we shouldn’t be putting so much emphasis on it”

“I just don’t think it’s a honorable thing, I think it’s nice, I don’t think it’s bad but I might be wrong, so don’t like jump on me for this, but most, a lot of the people who volunteer happen to be white women”

“You should be doing it anyway, and it’s like, that’s just like, kind of like, sad to me, you know?”

INTENTION

“A lot of people do volunteer just because they know it’ll help them get somewhere you know, like, they know that they’re like, you know if I volunteer than maybe I’ll get into a better college and stuff, and it’s like that shouldn’t be like bait”

“I see a lot of community service to be a way to increase your credentials and that’s one of things that I don’t like and I think that a lot of community service, I don’t know about most, is dishonorable because it’s using disadvantage people as a means to increase your reputation and I don’t like that part.”

“I feel like they don’t care, like they’re just doing it because they have to and it’s mandated by their sorority but like I think they don’t want to do. It’s kind of obnoxious.”

“Like you’re just trying to volunteer to get ahead, it’s almost like you’re using the people that need your help and you’re not invested in it and like if it wasn’t helping you then you would drop it, you know?”

DISHONORABLE

SELFISH
Figure 2

Honorability of Political Engagement

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

“I think if you have the right goals and the right motivations then it can be something that’s really successful and you can have a positive effect.”

“I think if you’re running for office to make a difference instead of just to run for office to continue to have growth in politics because we have a lot of politicians who run because they have the money and because they want the power, but if you’re actually out there to make your community better and to improve the conditions, then I think it is honorable doing it because you genuinely want to make a change and genuinely want to help the community, then that’s more honorable.”

“I believe it is honorable to run for political office and you know and hold political office as long as you know what you stand for and you know you’re not willing to give up.”

 PURE

“Then when you get into the office, then it’s like oh forget about all that stuff now I have to like work as a functioning person not as a visionary anymore. Then it’s not honorable, it’s just a job.”

“I think all these people who are involved and get into office and it really just becomes a job to them and it’s not anymore about changing the system.”

“In regards to being honorable I personally don’t think, for instance Presidential candidates will start off saying “this is what I want to do” and towards the end they shift towards what everyone else wants, and once they get into office.”

“There’s also a way that it doesn’t need to be like you can run for office but maybe you’re just like a figurehead or just like a umm the most handsome person that they had around you know, and it’s not exactly honorable because people are just kind of using you as a puppet almost.”

“There are the people who want to join politics purely for the power involved and I feel like if you’re doing it for the honor involved that’s a very dishonorable motive.”

“I don’t think so because you go back to the beginning of the founding of the country, most politicians, they go out and that’s what they want to do, that’s their job, they want to be a politician, there’s no honor in that.”

“I think every politician has some platforms that say this is what I’m gonna do and makes promises, I think what makes it dishonorable sometimes is maybe the whole money politics behind it.”

“If they’re doing it with hate as their intention then no, it’s this side or nothing, not to like actually better other people, then I think it’s dishonorable.”

HONORABLE

INTENTION

DISHONORABLE

SELFISH
Appendix

Recruitment Flyer

What RU Thinking?

Get together with other Rutgers students to talk about politics – be a part of the RU Voting focus groups.

Food and drinks will be served.
Students who participate will receive a $25 RU Express Card

Choose one of the following focus groups dates:
• 10/18 Busch Campus Center, Room 118, 7:00PM-9:00PM
• 10/20 Cap and Skull Room, Rutgers Student Center, 12:00PM-2:00PM
• 10/26 Board Room, Livingston Student Center, 12:00PM-2:00PM
• 10/27 Atrium, Rutgers Student Center, 7:00PM-9:00PM
• 11/1 Eagleton Institute of Politics, 10AM-12:00PM

Have questions? Want more information?
Contact Elizabeth C. Matto, ematto@rci.rutgers.edu, 732-932-9384 ext. 256 or ruvoting.eagleton@gmail.com
Focus Group Guide

- What are your goals for yourself after graduation (personal, professional, community)?
- What role do you see community service or volunteering playing in your future? What role does it play now? How about political involvement? What are some ways of being politically involved? How politically involved are you now?
- What words come to mind when you hear the word “politics” (looking to see if responses are “neutral” or traditionally associated with civics; negative; “for others”; positive)
- If you wanted to be politically involved, would you know how to go about it? Do you think the political process is open to you/accepting of you/available to you or are there any barriers?
- What duties do you think are associated with citizenship?
- Do you have a responsibility to be involved in your community (in the form of joining groups, volunteering, etc.)?
- How about duties to be politically involved? What are your political responsibilities (if any)? Duty to vote? Pay attention to politics? Contact public officials?
- Do you think community service is honorable? Why or why not?
- How about political participation? What about running for office? Why or why not?
- What sort of volunteer/service activities have you been involved with recently? On your own or as part of a club or class?
- Do you think these issues/causes have political causes or solutions? Are you interested in tackling these problems politically? Why or why not?
- Did you vote in the most recent election (2009 NJ Governor’s race)? Why or why not?
- Which of the following reasons typically explains why you don’t vote when you don’t vote?
  - You’ve recently moved and haven’t registered at new address
  - You’re not interested in politics
  - It’s too hard to get information about candidates
  - You don’t think your vote makes a difference in what happens in your life
  - You really dislike politics and government
  - You don’t think there is any difference between the parties
  - Voting is too much trouble
- Do you think voting matters? Do other forms of political participation matter?
- How about community service or volunteering? Do you feel as if you are making a difference when you engage in community service? Does volunteering make a bigger difference than political participation (such as voting)?
• What factors have had the greatest impact on your political interest, beliefs, activities (family, friends, teachers, etc.)?
• In what ways, if any, is Rutgers preparing you to be a civically and politically engaged?