

Date Printed: 06/16/2009

JTS Box Number: IFES_79
Tab Number: 77
Document Title: Executive Summary on Findings of National Youth Survey
Document Date: nd
Document Country: United States -- General
Document Language: English
IFES ID: CE01995





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Executive Summary on Findings of National Youth Survey
Conducted for 20/20 Vision

This nationwide survey provides a rich opportunity to learn more about how young people in America view a wide range of important issues, including national security, government and spending priorities, elected officials, the media and civic participation, environmental protection, and the U.S. role in the world. The survey was conducted for 20/20 Vision, a grassroots non-profit organization that works to engage citizen in policy making on peace, environmental and democracy issues. Thanks to the MacArthur Foundation for their generous support.

Overview

This generation of youth is engaged in the world but believes they can have more of an impact close to home than in a larger national arena. They have little faith in their elected officials and believe they respond mostly to special interests and campaign contributions rather than to concerns of constituents. They see the world as an unsettled place, posing a myriad of diverse threats to our national security such as domestic and international terrorism and Third World instability. They place a higher priority on domestic issues such as education, crime and health care than on international issues or on the military. At the same time, they believe the United States should have an active role in the world, paying its U.N. dues and intervening abroad when ethnic cleansing takes place. They are supporters of environmental protection and believe that many of today's environmental laws and regulations are not strong enough, particularly those concerned with protecting our water and air quality, and food safety. This generation thinks carefully about a wide range of issues. At the same, they lack confidence in the news media, the U.S. Congress and large businesses and corporations to "do the right thing for people."

This report is based on findings of a nationwide telephone survey of 500 adults ages 18-29, conducted from September 13-September 27, 1999.

Views of Government and Ways to Make Change

Youth today are highly cynical about major American institutions such as the U.S. Congress and the media. However, this is by no means a "drop out" generation. They believe in making change and they believe that changes can be made by regular people. When these young people want to make a difference, they are far more likely to try to make that change close to home than through national venues.

They are particularly cynical about elected officials and believe they are firmly in the pocket of special interests, acting in the interests of the people who give them campaign contributions rather than in the interests of their constituents. Although today's youth believe that regular people can stay informed on important issues, they are skeptical that elected officials will be responsive if constituents contact them about those issues.

Politicians are not the only ones who have lost the trust of today's youth — they also have almost no faith in news media to do the right thing for people.

Most Effective Ways to Make Change

Respondents believe the most effective way to make change is by "putting your ideals to work in your everyday life." Fully 93% of respondents believe that is an effective way to make change (63% very effective, 30% fairly effective).

In addition, 92% of respondents say that "volunteering locally to help people directly" is an effective way to make change, with 51% saying it is very effective. Clearly, this generation believes that the best way to make a difference is to work close to home, "putting your ideals to work in your everyday life" and "volunteering locally to help people directly."

Interestingly for a group as seemingly disenfranchised from national politics as these youth, a strong majority of them (88%) believe that "voting in elections" is an effective way to make change (57% say very effective, 31% say somewhat effective). Both Democrats (64%) and Republicans (65%) are much more likely than Independents (43%) to say that voting is a very effective way to make change. Clearly there is a connection between choosing a partisan affiliation and believing that voting is an effective way to make a difference.

In sharp contrast, there are several ways that these young people do not believe are particularly effective ways to make change:

- Only 18% of respondents believe a very effective way to make change is "expressing your opinion to a newspaper, or a radio or TV show." Even fewer people (15%) believe a very effective way to make change is by "writing a letter to elected officials."
- This perception also contrasts with the common view of Capitol Hill staffers that personal letters (not just form letters or petitions) are a highly effective way to impact Congress.

Elected Officials: Responsive or in the Pockets of Special Interests?

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a series of four statements about elected officials and civic participation by regular people. Their responses illustrate their cynicism about, and lack of faith in, national elected officials.

- Overall, 84% agree that "Members of Congress are more likely to take the side of special interest lobbyists and large campaign contributors than the side of their own constituents" (49% strongly agree, 35% somewhat agree). Only 14% of respondents disagree with this statement.
- In addition, 67% of respondents agree that "Regular people have little or no say in what the government does," with 30% strongly agreeing and 37% somewhat agreeing.
- When asked in an open-ended question about the greatest threat to the nation's national security, fully 15% volunteered responses about our own government and people. A sampling of these volunteered responses is below:

"The politicians – they lie and cheat so much they're a greater threat to the American people than any foreign country."

"Corruption in government, greedy people who are willing to sell out the people for the largest dollar."

"Corruption in politics – there is no honesty in the people who run the country."

"The biggest threat to the national security of this country is ourselves – the people are having less of a say in government regulations – that's why we become violent."

Although 66% of respondents agree that "Elected officials are responsive when voters take the time to express their opinions," there is little enthusiasm in the agreement: only 14% strongly agree with that statement while 51% somewhat agree.

At the same time, 70% of respondents believe that "Regular people can become well informed about what the government does by following the news and talking to other people," with 34% strongly agreeing and 36% somewhat agreeing.

Clearly, these youth do not have a high level of confidence in their elected officials or in the citizen lobbying process.

Little Confidence in American Institutions Like the U.S. Congress and the Media

Respondents have little confidence in either the U.S. Congress, the news media, or in large businesses and corporations to "do the right thing for people." They do, however, have a great deal of confidence in both environmental organizations and in the U.S. military.

When it come to the U.S. Congress, only 6% of youth say they have "tremendous confidence" that they will do the right thing for people, 65% say they have a fair amount of confidence and 28% say they have little or no confidence.

A majority — 53% — say they have "very little" or "no confidence" that large businesses and corporations will do the right thing for people. Only 8% say they have tremendous confidence that businesses and corporations will do the right thing for people, with 38% saying they have a fair amount of confidence.

The news media does equally poorly. Only 8% have tremendous confidence in them and 53% have "very little" or "no confidence" that the news media will do the right thing for people. Republicans are the most skeptical of the media, with fully 62% saying they have very little or no confidence in the media (compared to 51% among Independents and 48% among Democrats).

The two institutions that do well with youth are environmental organizations and the U.S. military. Overall, 80% of respondents say they have confidence in environmental organizations to do the right thing for people (29% have tremendous confidence while 51% have a fair amount of confidence). Only 19% say they have very little or no confidence in environmental organizations.

Fully 86% of respondents say they have confidence in the U.S. military to do the right thing for people (36% have tremendous confidence while 49% have a fair amount of confidence). Only 13% say they have very little or no confidence in the U.S. military.

Taking Action To Express their Opinions

Fully 52% of respondents say they have at some time expressed their opinions or comments to either a business (28%), a newspaper or magazine (27%), an elected official (23%), a radio or television show (18%) or to a government agency (15%).

People who are older and more educated are more likely to have expressed their opinion than younger people and people with less education. When it comes to calling TV or radio shows, or writing to elected officials, Republicans are more likely than Democrats and Independents to have acted.

In an interesting finding reflecting what members of Congress often say about the conservative tilt of their constituent mail, 33% of Republicans say they have contacted an elected official about their views, in contrast to only 21% of Democrats and 17% of Independents.

In another interesting finding which possibly reflects the predominance of conservative and libertarian talk shows on the radio today, 22% of Republicans and 20% of Independents say they have contacted a radio or television show to express their views, while only 12% of Democrats say they have done so.

Dramatically Increased Internet Access

In 1996, 20/20 Vision conducted a similar survey among youth. In a striking reflection of one of our nation's most rapid changes in recent years, only 28% of respondents in 1996 said they had access to the Internet. In this 1999 survey, fully 76% of respondents say they have access to the Internet, while only 24% do not.

The Concerns of Today's Youth

Top Concerns for the Federal Government to Address: Education, Crime and Health Care

At the same time that today's youth have little faith in elected officials to do the right thing, these youth have a wide range of concerns they believe the government should be addressing.

Asked in an open-ended question to name the two most important issues the federal government should address, education stands head and shoulders above other issues as the most important. Fully 35% of respondents volunteer a variety of education issues as their top concern, including more funding, high standards, better school safety, more teachers and smaller classroom sizes.

The next most important issue was crime: fully 21% of respondents volunteered crime-related items, including drugs, gangs, child abuse and the lack of tougher gun control measures. Although not surprising in the wake of the Columbine shootings and other stories of violence receiving national media attention, it is certainly interesting that crime was the number two concern of youth, since crime is often perceived to be a top concern of older people rather than younger ones.

These young people are also concerned about health care's affordability and accessibility (16%), with people increasingly concerned about the issue as they are older: while only 7% of respondents aged 18-21 volunteer health care as a concern, it is volunteered by 16% of those aged 22-25 and by 26% of those aged 26-29.

Ranking Government Priorities

When asked to rate how important it is for the government to address a wide range of priorities, respondents are once again clear: "improving education" is their top priority. On a scale of 0-10 where 10 means the issue is extremely important for the government to address and zero means the issue is not at all important for the government to address, fully 88% of respondents say improving education is very important (rating it 8, 9 or 10) with 60% giving it a rating of "10".

- The next most important issue is "fighting crime and drugs," with 78% saying it is very important and 46% giving it a rating of 10 for extremely important.
- "Making health care more available and affordable" is cited as very important by 74% of youth, with 48% saying it is extremely important.
- Seventy-three percent (73%) of respondents say that "having a strong economy" is very important for the government to address, with 37% saying it is extremely important.
- "Protecting the environment" is considered very important by 67% of respondents, with 33% saying it is extremely important.

- Fifty-six percent (56%) of respondents say that "putting tighter controls on handguns and assault weapons" is very important, with more than a third (36%) saying it is extremely important.

Top Issues When Voting for a Candidate

Respondents were asked to name the single most important issue to them when deciding which candidate to support for office. Overall, education is the most important issue, with 32% saying it is their top issue when selecting a candidate for office. Next is health care (18%), gun control (14%), crime and drugs (10%), a strong economy (9%) and protecting the environment (8%). The least important items for these youth when deciding which candidate to support for office are maintaining a strong national defense (4%) and campaign finance reform (1%).

Unacceptable Ways to Cut the Federal Budget

Another way to assess people's priorities is to ask them to make expenditure decisions about major government programs and initiatives. Once again, education and crime-fighting stand out as top priorities for government spending. Spending for environmental protection is also a top priority for youth: cutting current levels of environmental protection spending is unacceptable to more than two-thirds (70%) of respondents.

- Overall, 95% of youth say that "cutting education funding" is an unacceptable way to reduce federal government spending, with 77% saying it is a completely unacceptable way to reduce spending.
- Ninety-two percent (92%) of youth say that cutting Social Security and Medicare is unacceptable, with 64% saying it is completely unacceptable.
- Eight-four percent (84%) say cutting crime and drug-fighting funds is unacceptable, with 46% saying it is completely unacceptable.
- Seventy percent (70%) say cutting environmental protection funds is unacceptable, with almost a third (29%) saying it is completely unacceptable.
- In sharp contrast, only 47% say that cutting the military budget is unacceptable, with only 26% saying it is completely unacceptable.

U.S. Role in the World

National Missile Defense

Youth are fairly evenly split on the question of whether or not the U.S. should build a national missile defense system. After providing respondents with balanced arguments both for and against building a system, 53% oppose building a system while 45% support it. Clearly the public debate about whether or not the U.S. should invest in building a system has not been won by either side.

Question: Building a National Missile Defense System

"Please tell me which of the following two views is closer to your own: [ROTATE]

Supporters of building a national missile defense system say that the U.S. is currently defenseless against missile attacks by hostile nations or terrorists, so we must build a system so we can destroy incoming missiles before they reach U.S. soil.

Opponents say that the U.S. has already spent billions of dollars trying to develop a missile defense system with no significant technological success. They say the system will probably never work, is too expensive and that the money should be spent on more pressing national needs.

Which view is closer to your own? Do you [ROTATE] SUPPORT or OPPOSE building a national missile defense system?"

OPPOSE SYSTEM/DON'T BUILD IT	53%
SUPPORT SYSTEM/BUILD IT	45%
[DON'T KNOW/REFUSED]	2%

Strong Support for U.S. Payment of U.N. Dues

In addition to supporting U.S. intervention in cases of ethnic cleansing, almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents agree that the U.S. should pay its dues to the United Nations. Please note that this overwhelming majority of people support the U.S. paying its dues despite the fact that the amount owed — a staggering \$1.5 billion — was included in the question when it was asked in the survey.

Question: Support for U.S. Payment of U.N. Dues

"Every country that belongs to the United Nations is required to pay annual dues to the United Nations, also called the U.N. The United States Currently owes the U.N. one and a half billion dollars in dues money that the U.S. had previously agreed to pay.

[ROTATE STATEMENTS]

Some people say that the U.S. should not pay its U.N. dues because the U.N. is not a very effective organization, and because the money could be better spent in other ways.

Other people say that the U.S. should pay its U.N. dues because it is our legal obligation and responsibility, and not paying would hurt peace and humanitarian efforts around the world.

Having heard both sides, do you think the U.S. should [ROTATE]:"

PAY ITS U.N. DUES	74%
NOT PAY ITS U.N. DUES	21%
[OTHER]	1%
[DON'T KNOW/REFUSED]	4%

Knowing that 50% of Discretionary Budget is Spent on Military, Plurality Support Defense Cuts

Respondents were informed that the U.S. spends 50% of its discretionary funds on the military, and asked if, knowing this information, they believe the U.S. should spend more or less on the military, or if the U.S. is spending about the right amount. Having heard this information, only 12% of respondents say we should spend more money on the military, while 47% believe we should spend less.

Greatest Threat to U.S. National Security: Terrorism and Third World Instability

Youth today are far more concerned about the threat of terrorism than about the threat of war. When asked in an open-ended question "What is the greatest threat to the national security of the United States today," 27% cite some kind of terrorism or unrest in other countries, while only 10% cite a risk of war (including biological and nuclear warfare).

Interestingly, more people (15%) cite as the greatest threat to national security problems with our own government and our own people than cite war (10%) as a threat. Comprising this 15% are 4% who say the greatest threat to national security is politicians and people in government; another 4% cite people within our own nation; another 3% cite espionage and leaking information to outsiders; 2% cite President Clinton and 1% cite dishonesty and corruption at the highest levels of government.

Clearly, when young people think about national security threats today, they are thinking about a diverse and diffuse range of dangers, everything from terrorism to Third World instability to political corruption at home, rather than fearing war with clearly identified hostile nations. This view of the dangers to the United States probably shapes their view that the military, while important, is not the highest priority, since military preparedness does not actually address many of the concerns they hold about national security.

Do U.S. Actions Make the World Safer or More Dangerous?

Respondents are mixed on whether recent U.S. actions are making the world a safer or a more dangerous place. When asked if the recent actions of the United States have made the world safer, more dangerous, or not made a difference, 39% say it has made the world safer, 33% say it has made no difference and 24% say more dangerous.

Intervene in Ethnic Cleansing

Overall, youth today seem to support an active role in world affairs for the United States. When presented with balanced arguments both for and against the U.S. intervening when ethnic cleansing occurs elsewhere in the world, a full 60% of youth say that the U.S. should intervene, while only 35% say the U.S. should not intervene.

Question: Intervening in Ethnic Cleansing

"Ethnic cleansing describes when one ethnic group tries to force another ethnic group to leave an area by using violence, threats and discrimination.

[ROTATE STATEMENTS]

Some people say that even though ethnic cleansing is wrong, the U.S. should not intervene when it happens inside a nation's borders, because it is like a civil war and the U.S. should not intervene in other countries' civil wars.

Other people say that ethnic cleansing is so terrible and wrong that the U.S., and other nations should intervene to stop it whenever possible.