
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship and with the advice of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University and others, this report takes a first step toward the development of a continuing index of Florida's civic health – an index that will allow us to chart the condition of our civic life as well as we chart the condition of our economic life. It also sheds light on some of the major factors that shape citizen engagement in the state. Finally, it considers public support for policy changes that would institutionalize pathways to participation for Florida's young people. The report is based on data provided by the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey and an online sample of 506 Florida residents.

Florida's civic health is among the worst in the nation.

Compared to other states, Florida ranks

32nd in average voter turnout;

40th in the percentage of our citizens who have worked with others in their neighborhood to solve a community problem.

47th in the percentage of our citizens who attend public meetings; and

49th in average rate of volunteering;

47th taking all of this into account, Florida's Civic Health Index for 2007 puts it at 47th in the nation.

Education plays a critically important role in shaping the state's civic health. Education – especially intentional civic education – provides the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are essential to engaged citizenship. Reflecting that, Florida citizens who have attended college are significantly more engaged in their communities and more engaged in electoral participation than are those with a high school degree.

The lack of formal education creates life-long barriers to engaged citizenship. High school dropouts are virtually unrepresented in Florida's active civic life. This is especially critical in Florida since the state ranks 45th in the percentage of entering high school freshmen who actually graduate – more than one out of three high school freshmen fail to do so. This means that many of our citizens face a lifetime of not only economic hardship, but second-class citizenship as well.

Providing students with early civic experiences may well portend a more engaged citizenry as the Millennials take center stage in adult roles.

Florida's Millennial generation (those aged 15 to 29) show higher rates of voluntary community service than do Gen-Xers, Boomers, or Seniors. Much of that engagement is undoubtedly spurred by an increased emphasis on volunteering and community service in high schools and colleges.

Increased levels of political interest in the 2008 election are not likely to translate into a continuing higher level of engagement among Floridians.

There has been an upsurge of participation and interest in the 2008 presidential election, particularly among young Floridians. Nonetheless, the majority of Florida's citizens report that they do not expect to take any action on major campaign issues once the election is over. This appears to be true even among those who are now actively engaged.

Despite the fact that most Floridians are not personally engaged in civic life, they see the need for an engaged citizenry and support policy actions that would institutionalize pathways to engagement for younger citizens.

We find majority support for two initiatives that have recently been considered by the Florida Legislature:

Over 70 percent support the idea of requiring high school students to do community service as part of their course work.

Almost 70 percent support the idea of requiring students to pass a new test on civics and government.

Taken together, the findings in this report indicate that Florida should probably be on the critical care list. Our civic health is failing and in need of serious attention. Indeed, the quality of governance and the very quality of life in our cities, towns and villages depends on engaged citizens who make responsible choices and shoulder the civic responsibility for public work. An important part of the prescription for what ails us involves education. More of our students need to graduate and more need to go on to college. We need to encourage programs that teach students the skills of service and civic participation. And we need to find ways to encourage the rising Millennials to stay the course and to engage in the world of policy-making as well as the world of service. Strengthening Florida's education system and restoring the civic mission of our schools can do much to help us out of intensive care.