
Civic Interest, Engagement, and Skills Among Young Americans

Understanding perceptions across the high-school-to-postsecondary transition

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Executive Summary

Young people are frequently described as disengaged from civic life and disinterested in the issues shaping the country's future. Recent national polling finds that young people are in fact questioning their engagement in traditional, formal political activities. However, youth civic engagement experts assert that young adults are not apathetic or disinterested in their communities, they are instead seeking and finding different ways to be involved. For example, the Institute for Citizens and Scholars challenges the myth that young people are “checked out.” In recent survey work, they find that young people care about their communities, but they are unsure how to get involved (Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2025a).

On this 250th anniversary of the United States’ independence, this brief examines young people’s civic interest, engagement, and skills, drawing on two surveys of students who completed high school in 2025. We explore their beliefs and intentions as they graduated from high school in May 2025, and as college freshmen in February 2026. We also investigate differences by students’ demographic characteristics (gender, parents’ educational attainment, and race/ethnicity), and community characteristics (urbanicity). Finally, we analyze variation by Advanced Placement® (AP®) course taking for high school graduates and by intended major for college freshmen.

Given that civic identity, defined as one's sense of self as a participant in civic life, is theorized to form during the transition between high school and postsecondary experiences (Youniss & Yates, 1999), our in-depth investigation into attitudes and beliefs of this recent cohort of high school graduates provides an important glimpse into young people’s perceptions as they assume a more active role in shaping our country. The data in this brief echo many trends found in other recent polls. In our sample, students reported a broad interest in civic life, though lower interest in formal political involvement. They also recognized that their educational experiences served multiple roles: preparing them for both careers *and* community engagement.

KEY FINDINGS

- Roughly three in four high school graduates and college freshmen (72%–79%) reported high interest in community leadership roles and in conversations about current issues and events, even outside a classroom or club. Interest dropped by roughly half, to 43%–48%, for more formal engagement, such as engagement with elected officials.
- Students were confident in their own civic skills but more skeptical of their peers': More than two-thirds rated themselves strong on understanding perspectives of others, openness to having their beliefs challenged, and discussing controversial issues, yet rated their peers 12 to 39 percentage points lower on the same skills. In fact, around a quarter of high school students saw these dialogue and perspective-taking skills as a decided *weakness* for their peers. Further, both high school and college students indicated more interest and higher likelihood of engaging with people who are like them, rather than people who differ from them.
- Students who took AP Research or AP Seminar, courses explicitly designed to develop transferable academic skills including research, critical thinking, evidence-based argument, collaboration, writing, and presentation, showed the highest interest in nearly every civic skill and activity, compared to AP students who did not take these courses.
- Differences in civic skills and interests varied by up to 22 percentage points by intended college major, with college freshmen interested in majoring in the Social Sciences/Humanities most likely to report civic interest, and STEM students trailing behind on most, though not all, measures.
- Consistent with developmental research demonstrating that a sense of purpose in adolescence requires building both personal and civic meaning, high school and college students reported that their educational experiences developed both career *and* civic skills.

NEXT STEPS

The report concludes with suggestions for future research drawing on this sample, as well as outlines plans for future exploration of the interests of the high school graduates of 2026 as they transition to their first year after high school. We also offer considerations for high schools, colleges, and other organizations seeking to promote young people's civic interests, engagement, and skills.

Table of Contents

Introduction6

Data and Methods8

Participants..... 8

Primary Outcome Measures..... 9

Civic Domain Definitions 10

Analytic Approach 10

Results12

Research Question 1: How do high school graduates and college freshmen rate their civic interests, engagement, and skills? 12

Research Question 2: Which civic domains show differences among high school graduates and college freshmen by demographic and community characteristics?. 18

Research Question 3: To what extent do students who pursue varying types of AP courses and college majors show differences in civic domains? 24

Conclusion and Next Steps27

Appendix A: Item-to-Domain Mapping30

Appendix B: Item-level responses by subgroup31

References36

About the College Board.....38

College Board Research 38

Table of Figures

Table 1. Attributes of Survey Respondents 9

Figure 1. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshman reporting high interest in civic activities 13

Figure 2. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest and high engagement in various civic activities 14

Figure 3. High school graduates and college freshmen self- and peer-ratings on dialogue and perspective-taking skills 15

Figure 4. Percentage of high school students agreeing with statements about high school courses 16

Figure 5. Percentage of college students agreeing with statements about importance of outcomes of college attendance..... 17

Figure 6. Percentage of college freshmen selecting most valued outcome of a college education	18
Figure 7. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen rating their own and peer skills as a strength, by race/ethnicity.....	19
Figure 8. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest and engagement in dialogue and perspective-taking activities, by race/ethnicity	20
Figure 9. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest in ways to stay informed, by race/ethnicity.....	21
Figure 10. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest in community participation, by gender	22
Figure 11. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest in political life, by race/ethnicity.....	23
Figure 12. Percentage of AP students expressing high interest in civic activities	25
Figure 13. Percentage of college freshman across various intended majors expressing high interest in civic activities.....	26
Figure 14. Percentage of college freshman across various intended majors expressing high interest in working with others.....	27

Introduction

A common narrative holds that young people are indifferent to politics, their communities, and the country's future. Three recent national polls of young people may lend some support to this perspective. A recent AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research (2025) poll found that only about two in 10 adults under 30 follow U.S. politics "extremely" or "very" closely, compared with roughly a third of adults overall, and 45% of those 60 and older. The Kettering Foundation and Gallup's inaugural *Democracy for All Project Report* similarly found that only a slim majority (53%) of adults 18 to 29 consider democracy the best form of government, compared with 80% of adults 65 and older, and that younger adults are markedly less likely to say democracy is performing well (Kettering Foundation & Gallup, 2025). The Harvard Youth Poll's 2025 report sharpens the picture: Only 35% of 18- to 29-year-olds believe Americans with opposing political views still want what's best for the country, and 47% avoid political conversations altogether out of concern about how others will react (Harvard Public Opinion Project, 2025). Finally, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars' 2023 national survey of 18- to 24-year-olds found that respondents averaged only 1.6 correct answers out of 4 basic civics questions, and majorities reported low trust in government (52%) and dissatisfaction with the political system (57%) (Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2023).

While these may be sobering statistics, data from some of the same surveys complicate the narrative. While perspectives regarding the formal political system may be negative, young people still show a commitment to civic participation and a democratic society. For example, 72% of 18- to 29-year-olds say it's important that the United States remains a democracy (Harvard Public Opinion Project, 2025). Voting itself continues to be seen as a vital civic activity: About two-thirds of adults under 30 call it "extremely" or "very" important, even as far fewer say they follow politics closely day to day (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2025). The Institute for Citizens & Scholars (2023) found this generation shows lower ideological polarization than older cohorts, broad pride in being American, and a rejection of political violence. Additional analyses demonstrate that 9 in 10 young people feel a responsibility to their communities (Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2025a, 2025b).

Taken together, these mixed findings from recent polls suggest that engagement approaches might be changing: Young people care about their communities, but their interests and skills may push them into activities that differ from those preferred by older adults. In this research, we seek to understand young people's orientation to civic interests, skills, engagement as this time period is when civic participation is actively forming. Civic identity formation is considered a primary developmental task of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Youniss & Yates, 1999), and attitudes are most susceptible to change between ages 18 and 25 (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989). Civic behaviors also develop on a similar timeline: Voting becomes habitual after a person's first one or two eligible elections (Plutzer, 2002), and longitudinal evidence shows that civic participation in these years of young adulthood predicts civic behavior 15 or more years later (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

This prior research suggests that the high-school-to-postsecondary transition period we investigate with our data is the period when civic identity is actively forming, when it is most possible to shape, and when whatever habits form first are likely to persist.

This transition period is also particularly interesting given prior research on differences in civic engagement trajectories associated with college attendance. Attending college potentially opens up access to new civic infrastructure, such as student government or campus civil-discourse programming, while not attending college is associated with a measurably smaller civic footprint down the line. Kawashima-Ginsberg and Medina (2024) find a nearly 30-point gap between the 2024 voter turnout of youth with a bachelor's degree and those with a high school diploma but no college experience. Similarly, in College Board's *Education Pays 2026* report, we find that 76% of 25- to 44-year-old bachelor's degree holders voted in 2024, compared with 42% of high school graduates in the same age group (Pender et al., 2026). Dee (2004) finds that simply growing up in geographic proximity to postsecondary institutions has large effects on voter participation and support for free speech.

Volunteering follows the same pattern: 17% of high school graduates volunteered in 2023, versus 38% of bachelor's degree holders and 49% of those with an advanced degree (Pender et al., 2026). Notably, these gaps have not closed over time; the prior edition of College Board's *Education Pays* report found a comparable 19%/40%/51% split in volunteerism in 2019, as well as a 31-point voting gap (77% vs. 46% in 2020), meaning the most recent data show the education-based civic gap holding steady or slightly widening, not shrinking (Ma & Pender, 2023).

The skills explored in this brief also have value that extends beyond active civic life. Employers consistently rank collaboration across diverse viewpoints, communication, and critical thinking among the competencies they most want in new graduates (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019, 2025), and increasingly hire on this basis directly. Almost two-thirds of employers now use skills-based hiring practices to evaluate candidates against these competencies, rather than credentials alone (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2025). Skills like working with people who see things differently, evaluating evidence, and supporting arguments prepare a student to engage civically, and are also skills that prepare them for the workplace.

Our study is designed to provide further evidence on civic engagement drawn from 2025 high school graduates. In May 2025, we surveyed nearly 2 million 2025 high school graduates, and separately, in February 2026, surveyed nearly 1.5 million students of the same graduating cohort after they enrolled in college. A subset of roughly 2,400 respondents completed both surveys. These surveys explored students' perspectives across a robust set of 35 items capturing interest in and engagement with a variety of civic opportunities, as well as perceived skills tied to interacting with peers and community members.

To highlight patterns across this breadth of items, we draw on civic engagement literature to construct four civic domains: 1) dialogue and perspective-taking; 2) staying informed; 3) community life; and 4) political life. These civic domains are described in more detail below, and are used to address the report's three research questions:

1. How do high school graduates and college freshmen rate their civic interests, engagement, and skills?
2. Which civic domains show differences among high school graduates and college freshmen by demographic and community characteristics?
3. To what extent do students who pursue varying types of high school AP courses and college majors show differences in civic domains?

In alignment with the research questions, we first discuss high school graduates and college freshmen's civic interests, engagement, and skills overall, identifying which types of civic activities are most popular. Second, we explore whether differences on these measures occur by demographic characteristics (specifically by gender, parents' educational attainment, and race/ethnicity), and high school urbanicity. Third, we explore differences in civic skills and interest in engaging in civic activities for students who took various Advanced Placement (AP) courses (for high school graduates) and intended major (for college freshmen).

We conclude this report with an overview of future research that will extend these findings with additional investigation related to college attendance, as well as add another cohort of student data. Findings from both this and future research are intended to inform organizations committed to developing young peoples' civic interests, engagement, and skills so the United States can flourish for another 250 years and beyond.

Data and Methods

Participants

This brief draws on College Board's yearly high school graduate and college freshman surveys. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for both of these survey samples. The 2025 High School Graduate Survey (HSG) was administered in May 2025 to nearly two million graduating seniors who had opted in to receiving College Board communications. Nearly 47,000 students participated in the survey, yielding a 2.4% response rate. This survey was administered online via Qualtrics, with randomized sections and items, to address survey length. This approach meant that not every student saw every question or section. Reminder emails were also sent. High school graduates did not receive any incentive for their participation.

The 2026 College Freshman Survey (CFS) was administered online in February 2026 to students who graduated high school in spring 2025, with the objective of learning more about students' transition from high school to college. The survey was sent via email to nearly one-and-a-half million students from College Board's 2025 high school cohort who had opted in to receiving communication from College Board.¹ Participation was incentivized; students received a \$20 gift card for completing the survey. Reminder emails were also sent to students in an attempt to increase response rates. Approximately 17,500 students responded to the survey, resulting in a 1.2% response rate. The 20-minute online survey was administered via Qualtrics and included items measuring students' experience transitioning from high school to college. Select items and sections of the survey were randomized to conserve time, which meant that not every student saw every question or section of the survey.

Table 1. Attributes of Survey Respondents

Category	Subcategory	High School Graduates Survey (n = 46,532)	College Freshman Survey (n = 17,549)
Gender	Female	63%	68%
	Male	38%	32%
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian	0%	0%
	Asian	12%	17%
	Black	10%	9%
	Hispanic	20%	22%
	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0%	0%
	White	39%	38%
	Two or More	4%	5%
	No Response	14%	9%
Parent Education	Bachelor's degree+	33%	31%
	Less than Bachelor's degree	67%	69%
PSAT™ 10	Average Score	1081	1133
Urbanicity of High School Attended	Rural/Town	24%	20%
	Suburban	45%	47%
	Urban	31%	33%

Primary Outcome Measures

Both surveys included 35 civic engagement related items, measuring students' civic skills, engagement, and interest. The civic skills items were Likert-type items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = 'a major strength' to 5 = 'a major weakness,' or 1 = 'Very interested' to 5 = 'Not sure.' The civic engagement and interest items asked students to rate their level of interest or engagement on a 10-point scale, with 0 signifying 'not at all interested,' and 10

¹ The total number of students invited to the College Freshman Survey is lower than the number invited to the High School Graduate Survey largely because many students lose access to their school district email address after high school graduation, making it impossible to contact them once that email address has been turned off.

‘extremely interested.’ Item wording was consistent across both surveys. See Appendix A for the complete list of items, including their mapping to the domains described below.

Civic Domain Definitions

Informed by prior research, this brief divides the outcomes examined in the High School Graduates and College Freshmen Surveys into four civic domains. Those four domains are:

1. *Dialogue & perspective-taking*: The disposition and skill to exchange views, collaborate on shared problems, and negotiate disagreement with people whose beliefs or backgrounds differ from one's own. This domain is an extension of a skill cluster named independently across multiple civic-education frameworks, including dialogue and interpersonal perspective-taking (Hatcher, 2011) and deliberation and bridge-building across differences (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). In this study, the domain is composed of items related to talking and collaborating across differences.
2. *Staying informed*: The practice of following current events and the skill of locating, evaluating, and using credible sources of information. This domain reflects what Zukin et al. (2006) term cognitive engagement, following government and public affairs and consuming news as a dimension of civic engagement distinct from acting on that information. We create this domain from items related to following current events and knowing how to find reliable information.
3. *Community life*: Participation in, and leadership of, local activities intended to improve conditions in one's community through nonpolitical means. This domain reflects the nonpolitical half of Ehrlich's (2000) definition of civic engagement; promoting the quality of life in a community through nonpolitical means. In this study, the domain compiles items related to local community activities.
4. *Political life*: Engagement with formal political processes and institutions, including voting, elections, political organizations, and interactions with elected officials. This domain reflects the political half of Ehrlich's (2000) same definition. Similarly, political life is operationalized in the civic voluntarism model of Verba et al. (1995) as voting, campaign activity, and contacting officials. We measure this domain with items related to voting, elections, political organizations and activities, and engagement with elected officials.

Analytic Approach

Data from both surveys were analyzed using SPSS. Unweighted descriptives and frequencies were calculated, along with crosstabulations of all 35 civic engagement items by subgroup of interest, to investigate differences in civic-related attitudes and beliefs across groups. Because of item/section randomization, sample size varied across items and tables.

Many analyses explore differences in response for students in the following subgroups: urbanicity (urban, suburban, town, rural);² AP course taking (Social Sciences/Humanities, STEM, Capstone); race/ethnicity (American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, White, Two or More Races), gender (male, female); parental education (possessing/not possessing a bachelor's degree or higher);³ and disciplinary area of intended college major (Social Sciences/Humanities, STEM, or Professional/Applied).⁴

To aid in the interpretation of subgroup comparisons, civic interest and engagement 10-point scale scores were classified into three ordinal categories: Low, Moderate, and High. Raw scores were recoded and bucketed such that the Low category included scores between 0 and 3, the Moderate category included scores between 4 and 6, and the High category comprised the remaining scores of 7 to 10. The same approach was applied to both the high school graduate and college freshman samples.

Differences greater than or equal to 5 percentage points between subgroups were flagged as meaningful.

A few notes of caution are worth mentioning about differences observed between high school graduate and college freshmen survey respondents, since they reflect responses from two different time points. This is not a longitudinal study. While members of the graduating class of 2025 were invited to participate in both surveys, and there is in fact some overlap between those responding to the High School Graduate and College Freshmen Surveys, respondents to the two surveys are largely distinct. The characteristics of students who are high school graduates and college freshmen differ, as displayed in Table 1. Future research will explore the overlapping subset of approximately 2,400 students who completed both surveys.

For these reasons, none of the analyses in this report should be viewed as causal, i.e., that being a college freshmen *caused* college freshmen to differ from high school graduates, or that being female or having an intended education major caused greater interest in community life. We present differences between high school and college students so that readers can understand the civic interests, engagement, and skills of both groups.

² Urbanicity was derived from a student's high school location using data from National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.

³ Demographic and AP course taking data derived from College Board administrative data.

⁴ Intended college major derived from student self-reports on the College Freshman Survey.

Results

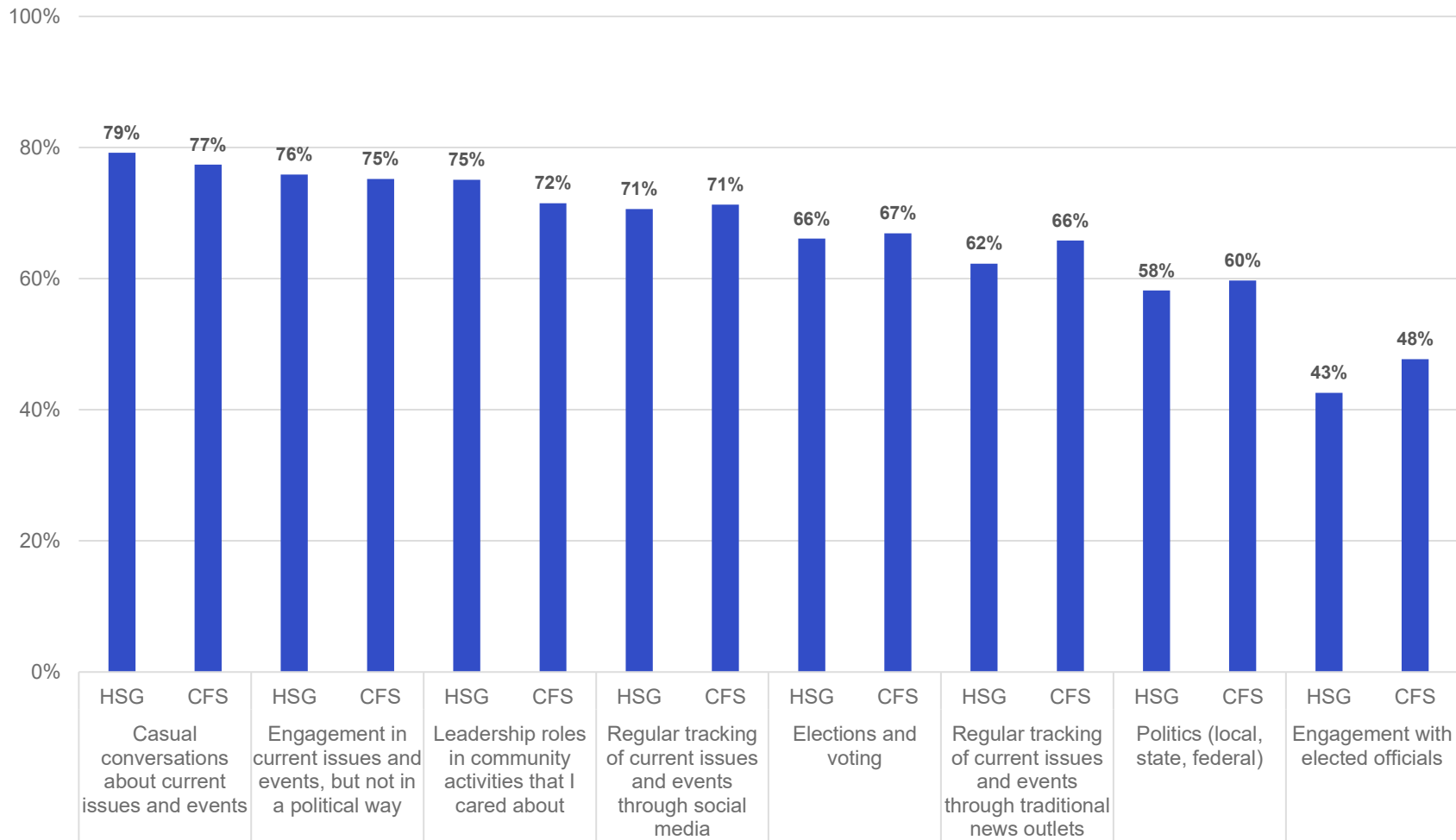
Research Question 1: How do high school graduates and college freshmen rate their civic interests, engagement, and skills?

Figure 1 presents the percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen who reported being somewhat or very interested in each of a series of civic activities, all drawn from the same survey question. High school graduate and college freshmen samples expressed a similar degree of high interest in several activities: Having casual conversations about current issues and events (79% and 77%), engaging in current issues and events in a nonpolitical way (76% and 75%), and taking on leadership roles in community activities (75% and 72%). We also found that both groups expressed interest in measures of staying informed, with both high school and college respondents more likely to report interest in tracking current events through social media than through traditional news outlets, by 9 and 5 percentage points, respectively.

Interest dropped sharply and consistently when it comes to formal political life: Only 43% of high school graduates and 48% of college freshmen reported high interest in engaging with elected officials, and 58% and 60%, respectively, reported high interest in politics at the local, state, or federal level.

High school graduates and college freshmen were also similar in the items they were most (casual conversations about issues and current events) and least (engagement with elected officials) interested in.

Figure 1. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshman reporting high interest in civic activities



Note. Survey question asks: "How would you rate your level of interest in the following?" Bolded percentages at the top of each bar reflect combined "Very interested" and "Somewhat interested" responses. Figure does not include "Not Sure" responses.

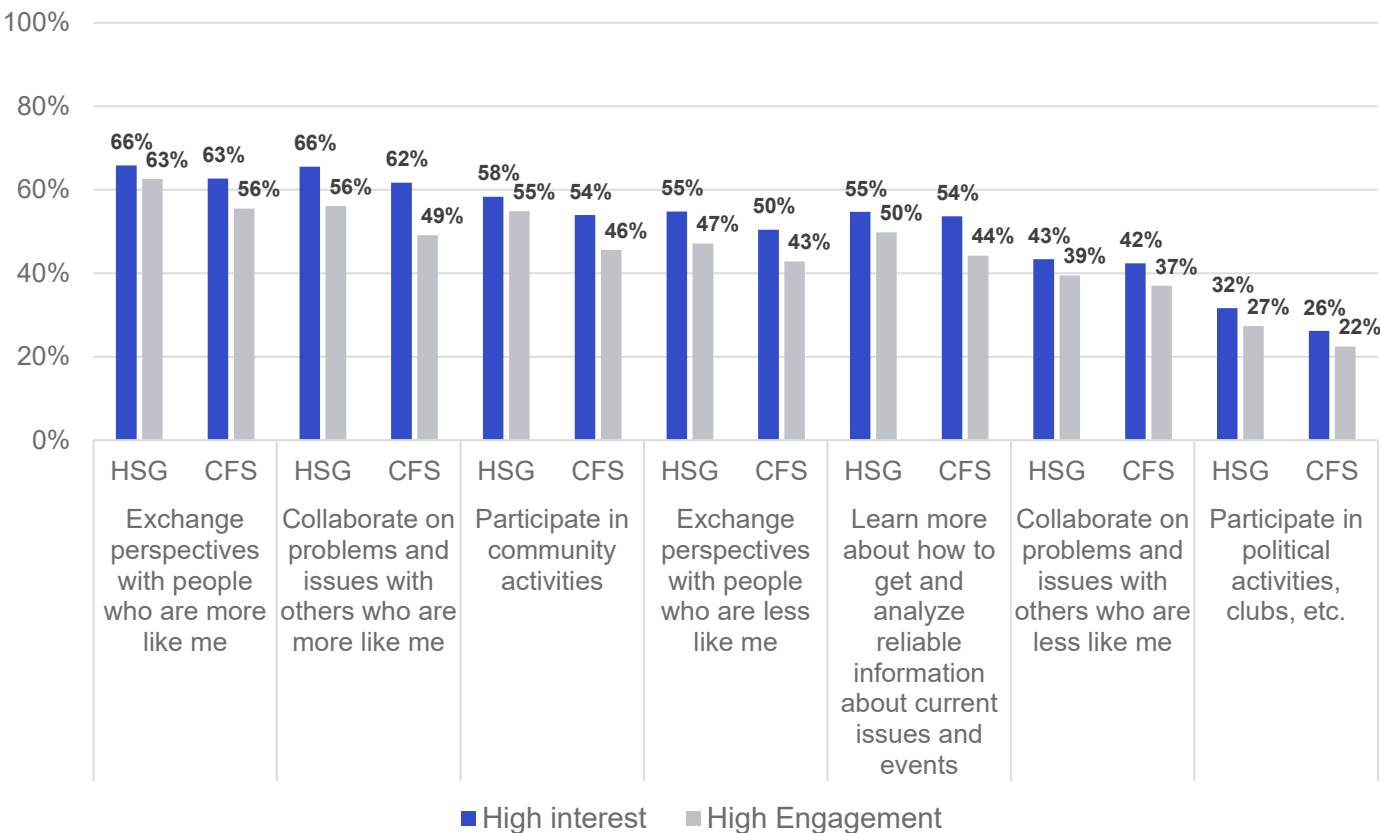
Interest and engagement: Gaps Between Engaging with Similar and Dissimilar Others

A related pair of survey questions asked students to indicate both their level of interest in, and the extent to which they have already engaged in, a separate set of seven civic activities (rated on a 0–10 scale, with 7 or higher counted as “high”). Broadly, Figure 2 demonstrates that across all of these activities, a clear pattern emerged: high school students consistently reported higher interest and engagement compared to college students. Further, both high school and college students reported higher *interests* than actual *engagement* in all civic activities. The gap between interest and engagement ranged between 3 and 13 percentage points.

Figure 2 also shows that, consistent with results from Figure 1, the political life item again had the lowest rate of interest and engagement of any item measured: Only about one third of high school students and around a quarter of college students indicated high interest in formal political activities.

The dialogue and perspective-taking domain also showed a distinct pattern. Approximately two-thirds of both high school and college students indicated “high” interest in exchanging ideas or collaborating with “*people who are more like me*,” with less interest in interacting with “*people who are less like me*.”

Figure 2. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest and high engagement in various civic activities



Note. Survey questions ask: “How would you rate your level of interest in each of the following?” (interest) and “To what extent have you already engaged in the following activities?” (engagement). “High” interest/engagement = 7 or above on a 0–10 scale.

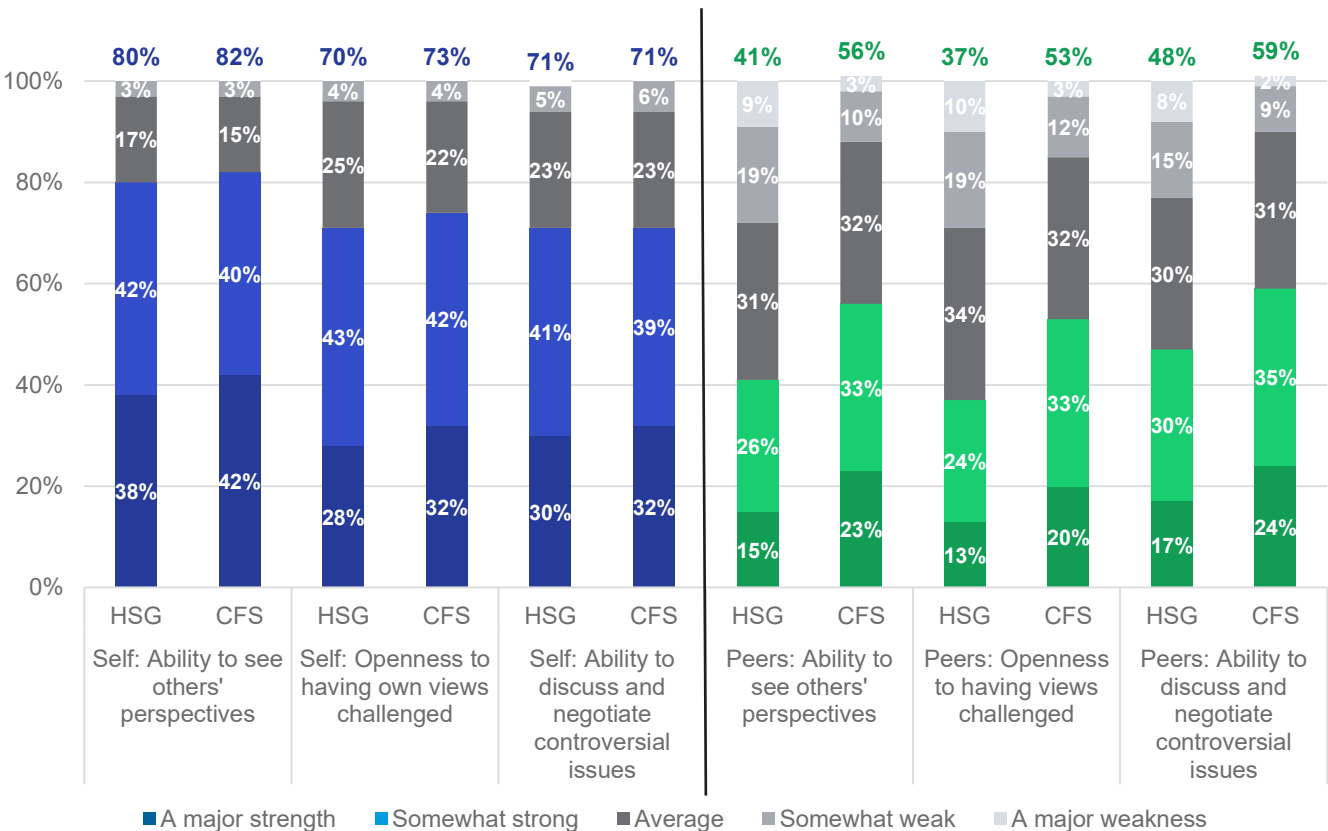
Perspective-Taking Paradox: Self vs. Peers

Students also rated both their own as well as their peers' dialogue and perspective-taking skills. As shown in Figure 3, on self-ratings, more than four-fifths of students across both surveys (80% of high school graduates, 82% of college freshmen) viewed their ability to see the world from others' perspectives as a major strength or are in which they are somewhat strong. Nearly three-quarters (70% and 73%) gave themselves comparably high ratings on openness to having their own views challenged, and more than two-thirds (71% and 71%) did so on their ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues.

Peer ratings tell a very different story. Both samples were consistently and substantially less likely to rate their peers as highly as they rated themselves. Among high school graduates, only 41% rated their peers highly on perspective-taking (a 39-point gap from their 80% self-rating), only 37% did so on openness to challenge (a 33-point gap), and only 48% did so on discussing controversial issues (a 23-point gap). Interestingly, roughly a quarter of high school graduates actually indicated that engaging in this kind of dialogue and perspective-taking was decidedly a *weakness* of their peers.

College freshmen showed the same pattern, though differences between self-ratings and peer ratings were somewhat smaller: 56% rated their peers highly on perspective-taking (a 26-point gap), 53% on openness to challenge (a 20-point gap), and 59% on discussing controversial issues (a 12-point gap).

Figure 3. High school graduates and college freshmen self- and peer-ratings on dialogue and perspective-taking skills

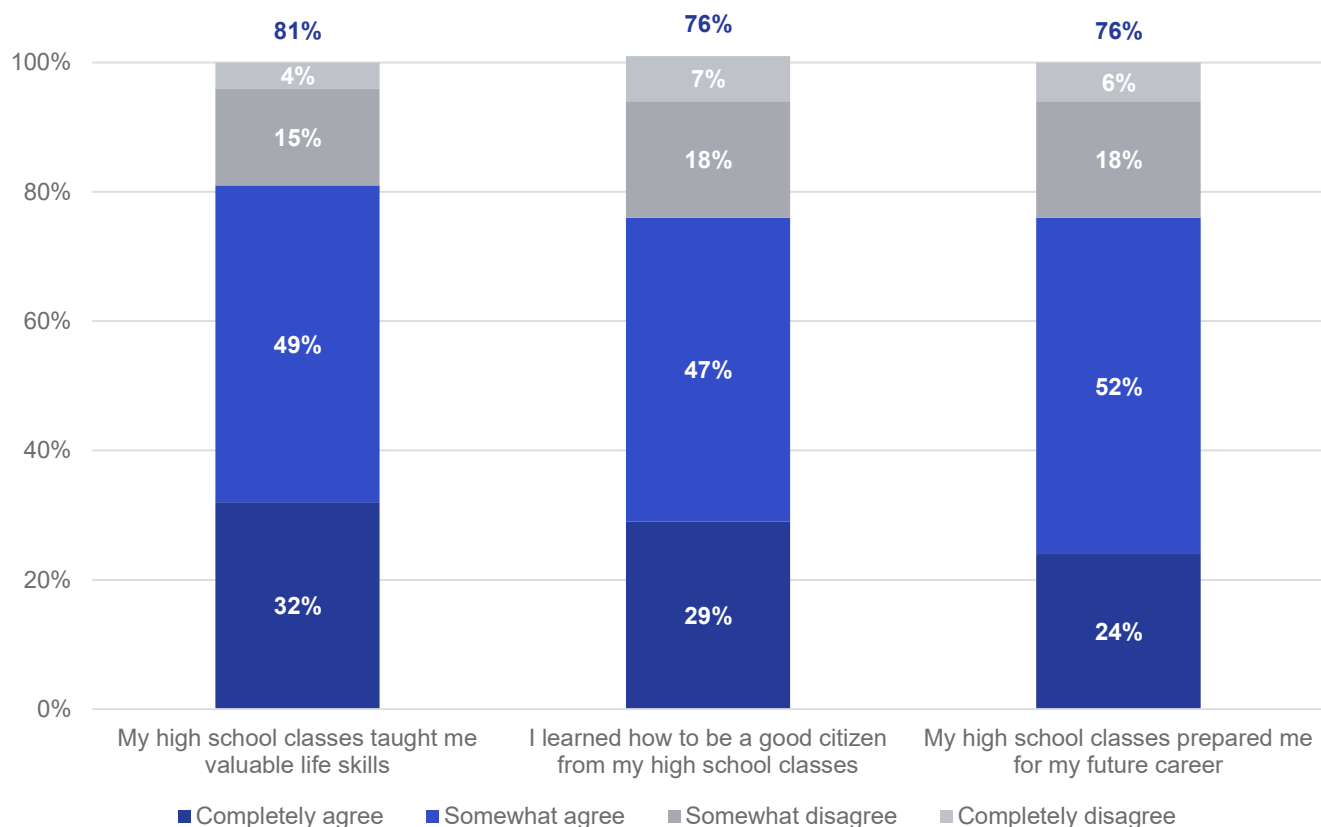


Note. Survey question asks: "How would you rate [yourself/students in your [school/college]] in the following areas?" Bolded percentages at the top of each bar reflect combined "Major strength" and "Somewhat strong" responses.

Students Report Educational Experiences Support Both Career and Civic Preparation

Developmental research suggests that building a sense of purpose in adolescence requires making both personal and civic meaning, not choosing between them (Damon, 2008). As shown in Figure 4, high school graduates reported that both career preparation and civic development were valued outcomes of their coursework. Asked separately how much they agreed with a series of statements about their high school classes, 76% of high school students agreed both that their coursework prepared them for their future career and that it taught them how to be a good citizen, alongside 81% who agreed it taught them valuable life skills more broadly.

Figure 4. Percentage of high school students agreeing with statements about high school courses

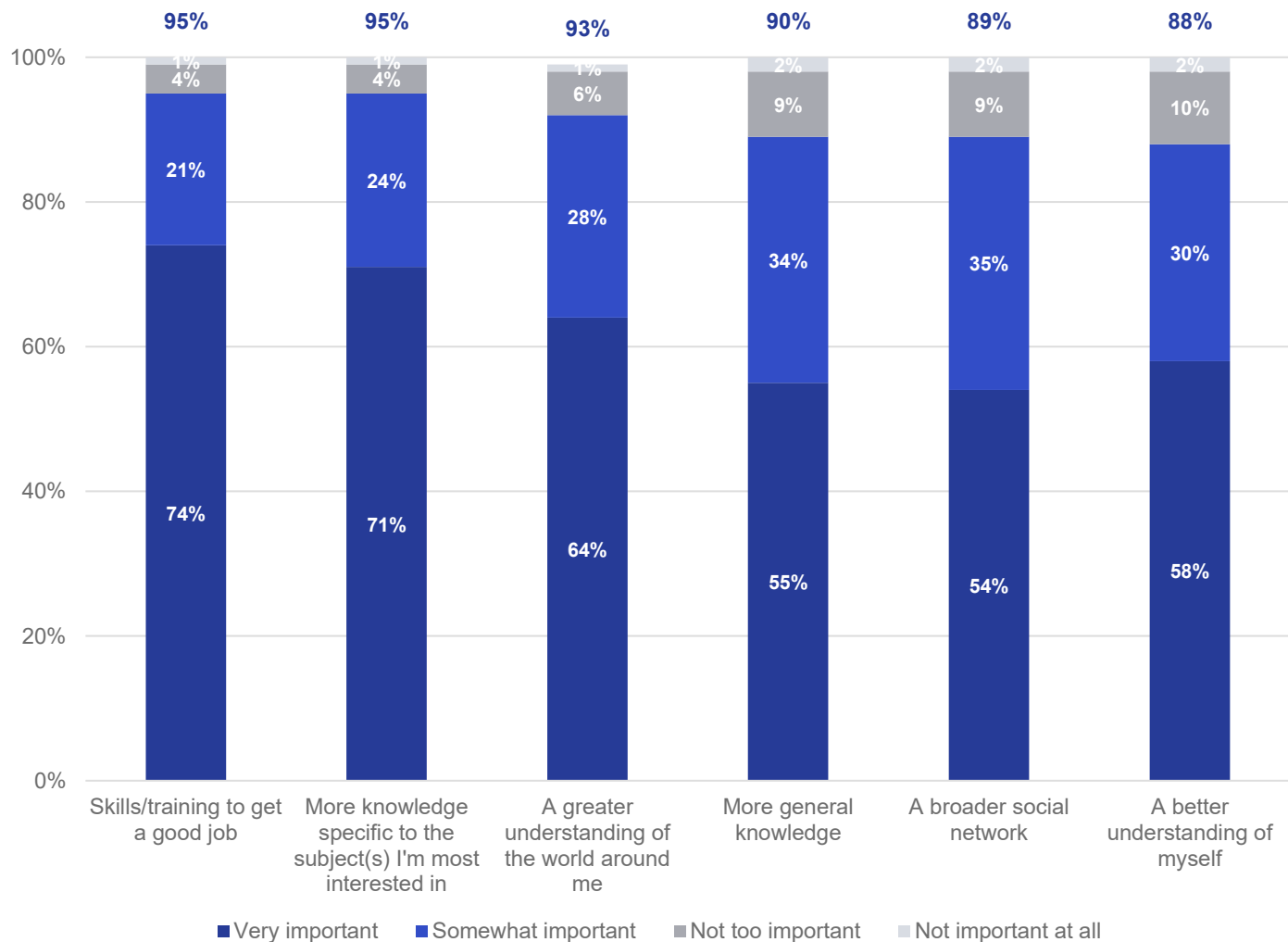


Note. Survey question asks “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your high school courses?” Bolded percentages at the top of each bar reflect combined “Completely agree” and “Somewhat agree” responses

When college freshmen were asked how important various outcomes of attending college were to them, they also indicated that there were both career and civic-focused benefits. As seen in Figure 5, 95% of respondents rated “skills/training to get a good job” and “more knowledge specific to the subject(s) I’m most interested in” as the most important benefits. The relative importance given to priorities more closely related to the community life civic domain was also high, though slightly lower than the career-tied priorities: 92% of respondents indicated gaining “a greater understanding of the

world around me” was important, followed by 89% who found building “a broader social network” important.

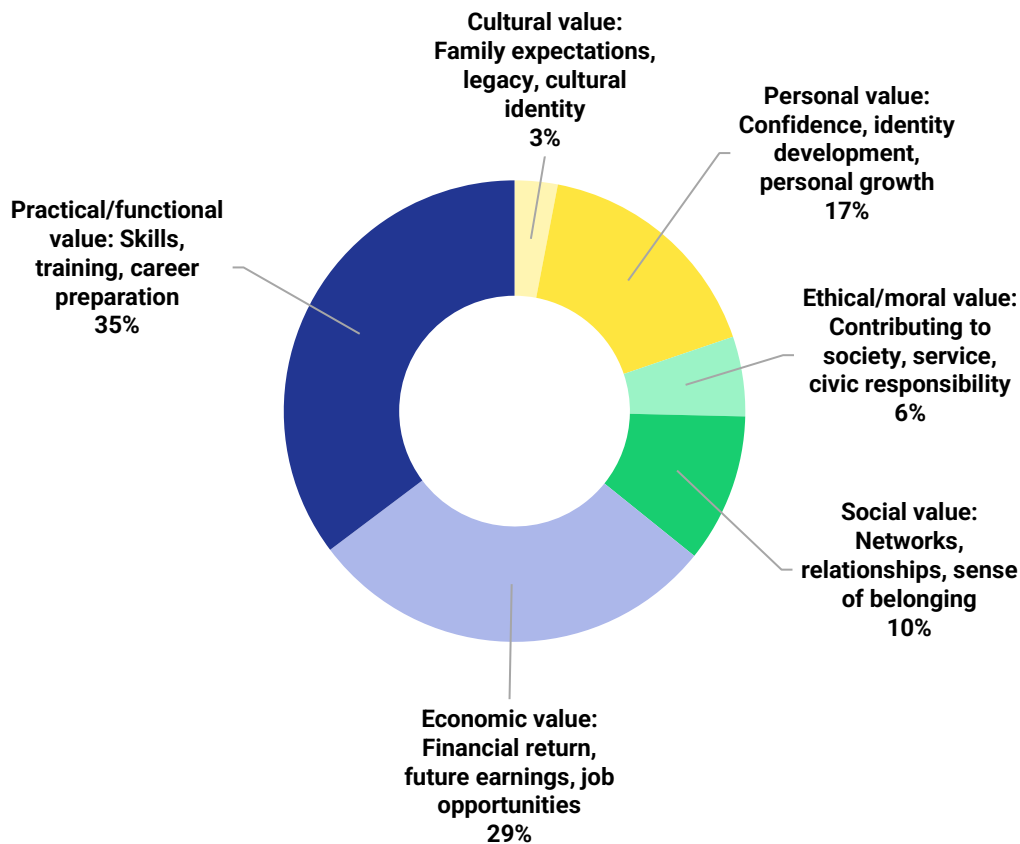
Figure 5. Percentage of college students agreeing with statements about importance of outcomes of college attendance



Note. Survey question asks “Thinking about your college experience, how important is it that you receive...?” Bolded percentages at the top of each bar reflect combined “Very important” and “Somewhat important” responses.

College freshmen also weighed in on a related but differently structured question, and their answers pointed a slightly different way when they were asked to choose the *single* factor that best reflects the value of a college education. Contemplating that forced choice, practical and economic framing were the most frequently selected options. As shown in Figure 6, 35% chose “Practical/functional: Skills, training, career preparation” and 29% chose “Economic value,” while only 10% choose “Social value: Networks, relationships, sense of belonging,” and 6% chose “Ethical/moral value: Contributing to society, service, civic responsibility,” the lowest-rated of six options.

Figure 6. Percentage of college freshmen selecting most valued outcome of a college education



Note. Survey question asks, “Which single purpose best reflects how you define the value of a college education?”

Research Question 2: Which civic domains show differences among high school graduates and college freshmen by demographic and community characteristics?

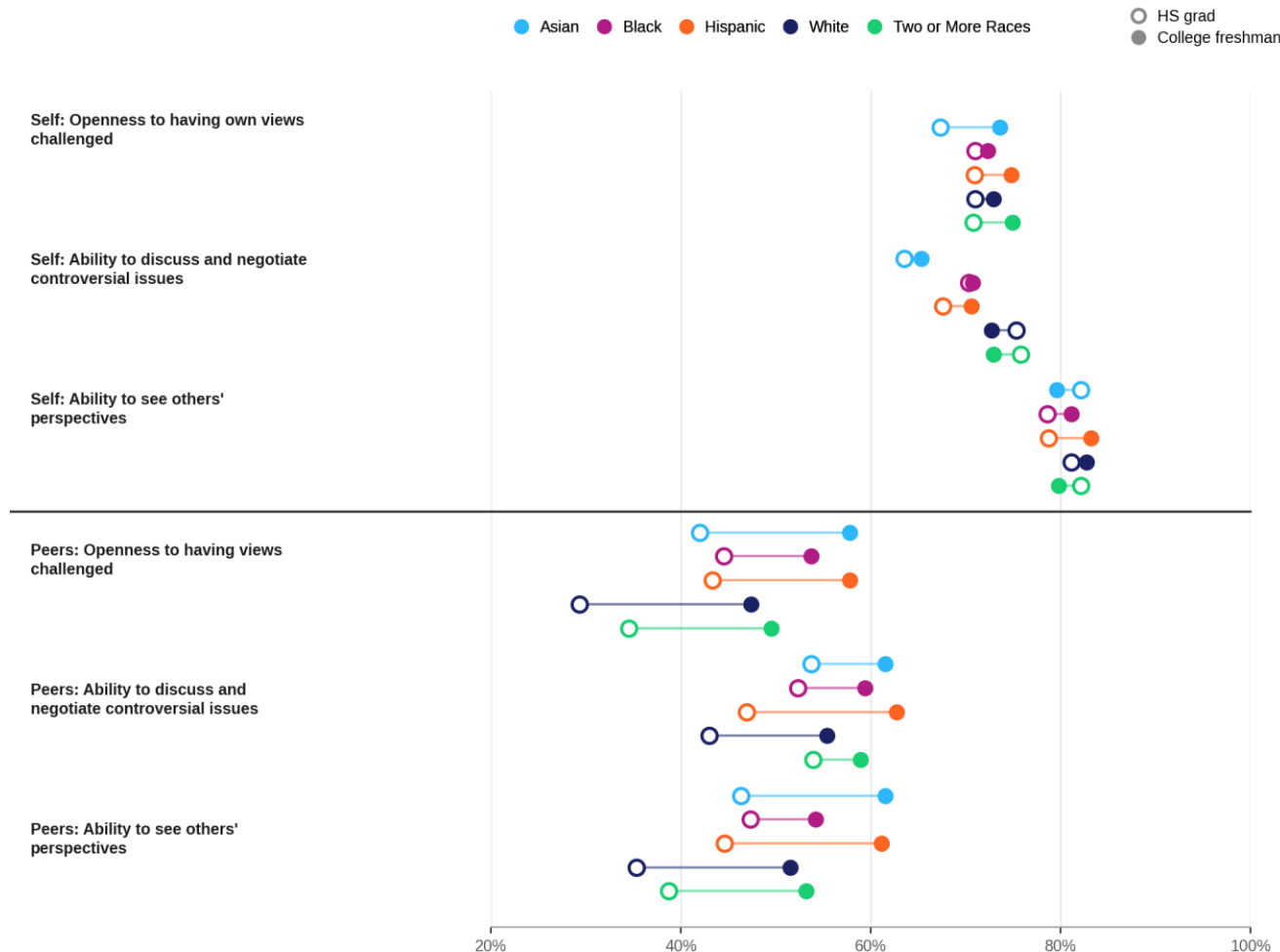
Organized by domain, analyses exploring this research question identified where a specific demographic or community characteristic (gender, parents' bachelor's degree completion, race/ethnicity, or high school urbanicity) was associated with a difference of at least 5 percentage points on a given civic item, in at least one sample. This section highlights some of these key subgroup differences, and complete responses for each subgroup to all survey items across all four domains are available in Appendix B.

Dialogue and Perspective-Taking

As shown in Figure 7, race/ethnicity differences were associated with responses to questions in the Dialogue and Perspective-Taking domain more than any other characteristic, with differences of at least 5 percentage points on 12 of its 15 activities. The clearest pattern concerned how students rated their peers, not themselves. Across both surveys, White students consistently rated their peers least favorably of any racial or ethnic group on all three peer-rating items. The gap was largest on openness to having one's views challenged. We found a 16-point difference between Black and White high school graduates (45% vs. 29%), and a 11-point difference between Asian and White college freshmen (58%

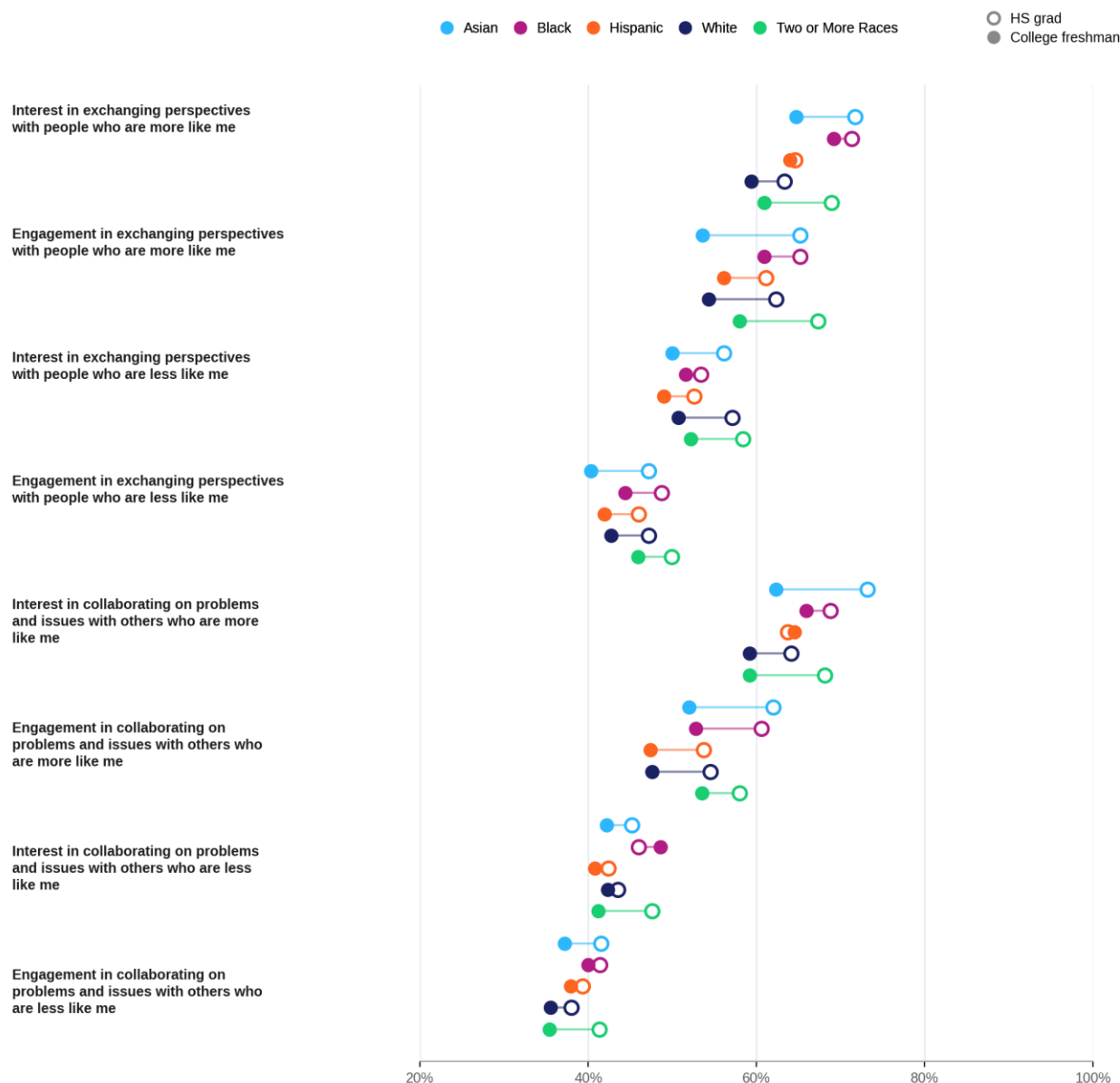
vs. 47%). White students did not rate themselves correspondingly low on the parallel self-rated items, but rather at or above the cross-group average. This suggests a gap in how peers are perceived, not in self-assessed skill.

Figure 7. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen rating their own and peer skills as a strength, by race/ethnicity



A second pattern involved interest and engagement with those whose views are *similar* to one's own views. Figure 8 shows Asian and Black students were more likely than White and Hispanic students to express high interest in exchanging perspectives and collaborating with people like themselves (a 7-to-10-point spread on these items). That spread narrowed on the parallel "less like me" items (down to roughly 3 to 8 points), and the ranking shifted. Separately, Asian students across both surveys rated themselves lowest of any group on their own ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues, despite not trailing on most other items in the domain.

Figure 8. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest and engagement in dialogue and perspective-taking activities, by race/ethnicity



Urbanicity was the domain's other major driver, and the pattern was clearest on the same peer-rating items where race/ethnicity distinctions were observed. Urban students rated their peers most favorably and town students rated their peers least favorably (by as much as 17 points among high school graduates) when considering ability to discuss controversial issues. That gap narrowed considerably for college students (to roughly 8 points on the same item), consistent with the broader narrowing of peer-rating gaps between high school and college observed across characteristics in this domain.

Gender's role in this domain was smaller. On self-rated ability to see others' perspectives, female students rated themselves higher (5 to 7 points). But on all three peer-rating items among high school

graduates, the pattern reversed: Male students rated peers more favorably than female students did, by 8 to 11 points.

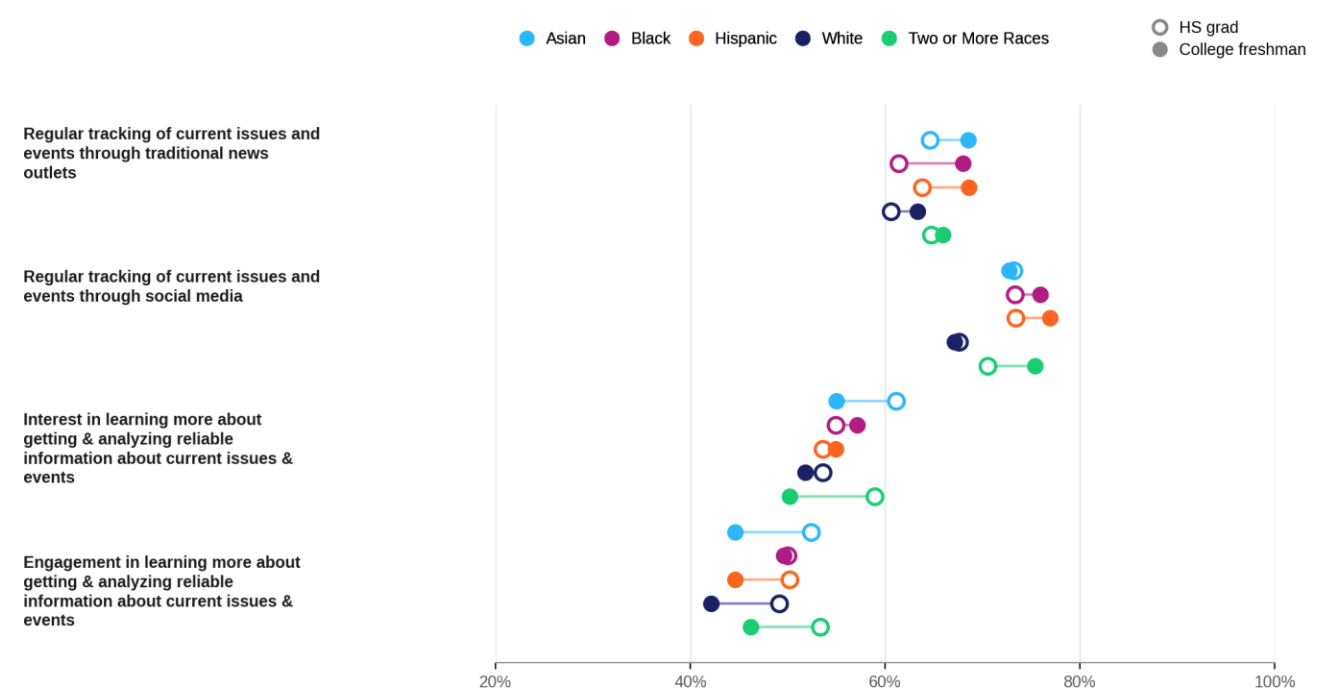
Parents' education played a narrower role, confined mostly to high school graduates. Students with a bachelor's-educated parent reported higher interest in exchanging (6 to 7 points) and, among high school graduates only, collaborating (5 points) with people less like themselves, along with higher self-rated (5 points) and peer-rated (8 points) ability to discuss controversial issues.

These additional findings related to demographic characteristics and differences in response to each of the additional civic domains that follow are presented in more detail in Appendix B.

Staying Informed

Race, ethnicity, and urbanicity were the Staying Informed domain's primary subgroup drivers. All four items in this domain showed a gap based on race/ethnicity in at least one group of survey completers. Figure 9 shows Hispanic students among the highest in interest in tracking news via social media, tied with Asian and Black students among high school graduates, and uniquely highest among college freshmen, while White students consistently ranked among the lowest in staying informed overall (by 5 points among high school graduates and 10 points among college freshmen). On interest in learning to evaluate reliable information, Asian students reported the highest interest among high school graduates, while Black students reported the highest interest among college freshmen, a 7-point gap across both surveys.

Figure 9. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest in ways to stay informed, by race/ethnicity



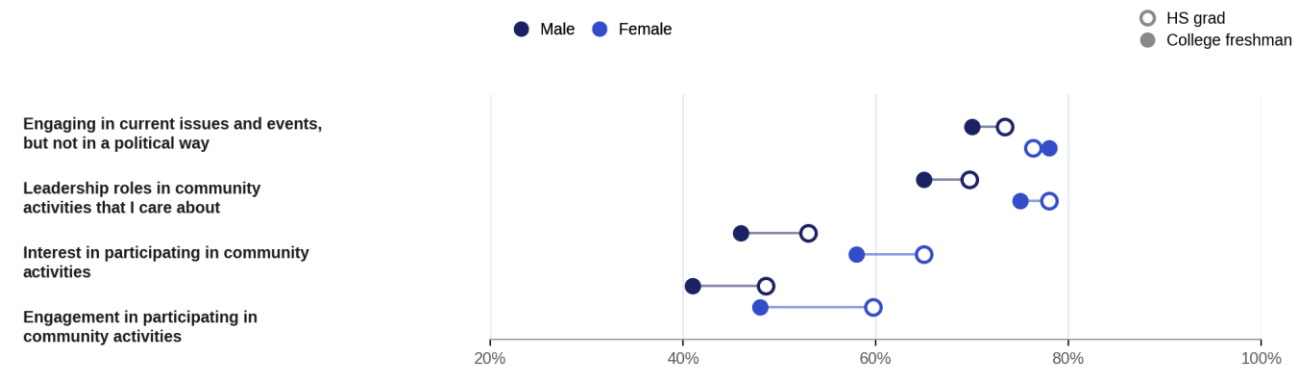
Parents' education did not meaningfully differentiate students' interest in activities that keep them informed about current events, but gender showed a modest effect on two items: female students reported higher interest in tracking current events through social media (5 points among high school graduates, 6 among college freshmen), while male students reported higher engagement in learning to evaluate reliable information (5 points among high school graduates).

Urbanicity was associated with this domain's largest gaps, up to 12 points between Urban and Town students on tracking traditional news among college freshmen. Urban students most often reported the highest interest, and Town students most often the lowest. That said, Suburban students led narrowly on two reliable-information items, and Rural students reported the single lowest interest in tracking social media among high school graduates.

Community Life

This was the only domain where gender affected every item. In Figure 10, all four Community Life items showed a gender gap, and female students reported higher interest, engagement, and leadership interest throughout, by 7 to 12 points.

Figure 10. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest in community participation, by gender



Parents' education followed a similar but narrower pattern: Students with a bachelor's-educated parent reported higher rates on three of the four items (roughly 6 to 8 points), including interest in, and engagement in, participating in community activities, and interest in community leadership roles among high school graduates specifically.

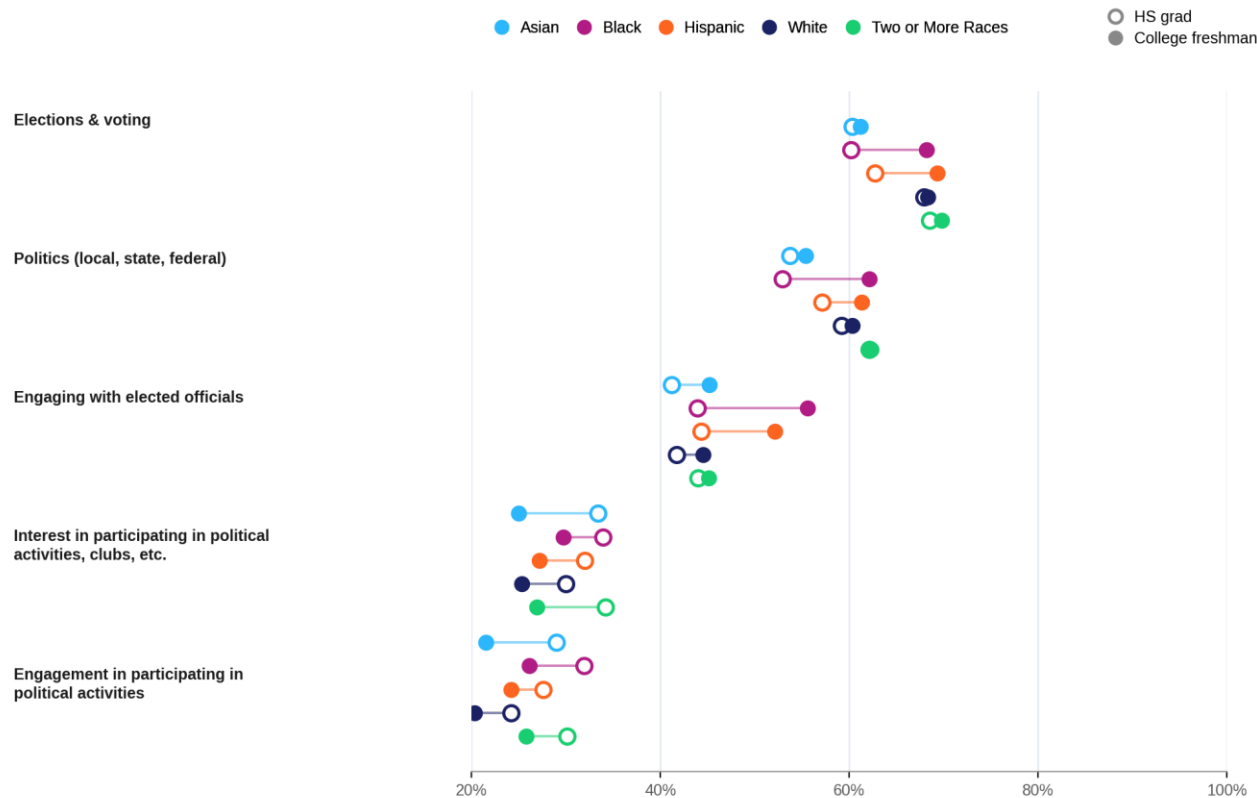
Race/ethnicity also affected every item in the domain as well, though less uniformly. No single group consistently reported higher interest. Hispanic students most often reported the lowest interest and engagement; Asian students showed the most interest in the high school sample on community participation, while Black students were the most interested in the college freshman sample on the same item. The domain's largest single gap was with 61% of Black college freshmen reporting high interest in participating in community activities, compared with 48% of Hispanic college freshmen.

Urbanicity was a comparatively minor differentiator for items within this domain; only 2 of 4 items show a gap, and one of them diverged from the pattern seen across other domains. Among college freshmen, Town students reported the highest interest in community leadership roles, not Urban or Suburban students. This was the one area in which being from a smaller community suggested higher interest rather than lower interest.

Political Life

Race/ethnicity also consistently shaped responses to items related to the Political Life domain. Figure 11 shows differences appeared on interest in elections and voting, interest in politics generally, interest in participating in political activities, engagement in political activities, and engagement with elected officials. White students reported higher interest in elections and voting than Black students did across both surveys, though the gap narrowed to virtually zero among college freshmen. On interest in politics more generally, the pattern split by sample: White students led among high school graduates, but Black students led among college freshmen. Engagement showed a more consistent reversal from the interest items: Black students reported higher engagement in political activities than White students did, across both surveys. On engagement with elected officials specifically, the gap was large and grew for college respondents. Among college freshmen, 56% of Black students reported high interest compared with 45% of White students, an 11-point gap.

Figure 11. Percentage of high school graduates and college freshmen expressing high interest in political life, by race/ethnicity



Parents' education surfaced as a differentiator only among high school graduates, and only on two items: Students with a bachelor's-educated parent reported higher interest in elections and voting (9 points) and in politics generally (5 points). Neither gap persisted into the college freshman sample.

Urbanicity affected two items in this domain, both clustered around the more formal aspects of political life: Engagement with elected officials (5 points among high school graduates, 6 among college freshmen) and interest in politics generally (5 points in both samples). Urban students were most interested and Town students least interested across nearly all of these comparisons.

Gender affected only two items in this domain, the fewest of any domain, and one of them reversed direction. Female college freshmen reported higher interest in elections and voting (6 points). But on engagement in political activities, also looking only at college freshmen, male students reported higher engagement than female students, by 5 points.

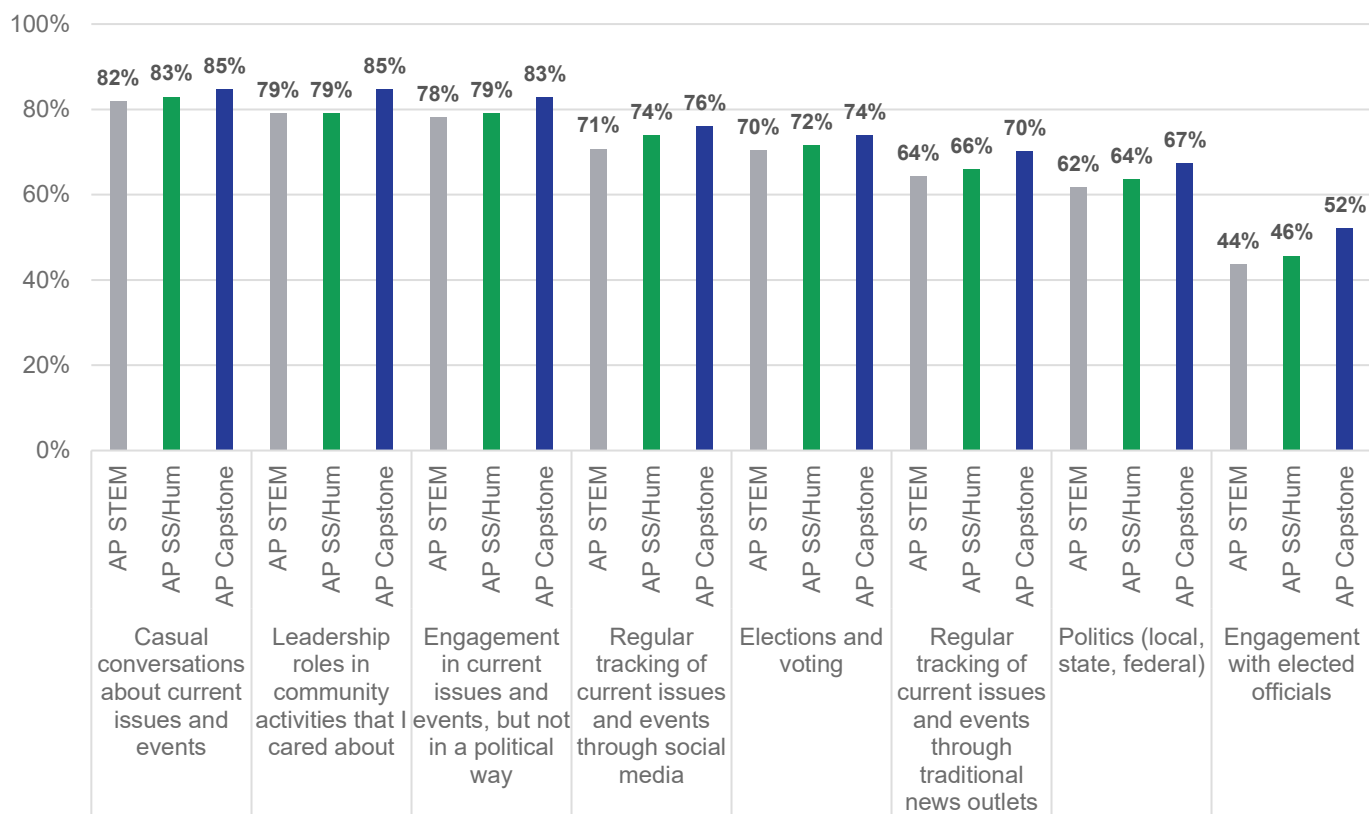
Research Question 3: To what extent do students who pursue varying types of AP courses and college majors show differences in civic domains?

Differences by High School Graduates' AP Course Taking

Within our sample, we were able to look specifically at the civic perspectives of students who took AP courses at some point during high school. We grouped AP courses into three categories: AP STEM, AP Social Sciences/Humanities, and AP Capstone,⁵ which we used to examine differences in interest in civic domains.⁵ Several interesting trends emerged. First, it is important to note that we found minimal difference between AP STEM and AP Social Science/Humanities groups across all civic domains. Where we did see distinct differences was between these two categories and the AP Capstone courses, which comprise AP Seminar and AP Research. These two courses, which together create an AP Capstone Diploma[™] track, are designed explicitly to build research, analysis, evidence-based argumentation, collaboration, writing, and presentation skills. As seen in Figure 12, we found that AP Capstone students reported higher interest in civic activities when compared to AP students who did not take these AP courses.

⁵ Students in our sample may have taken courses in one or more of these categories. Future research will explore AP course taking patterns in more detail.

Figure 12. Percentage of AP students expressing high interest in civic activities



Note. "AP SS/Hum" refers to AP courses that are characterized as either Social Sciences or Humanities. Survey question asks: "How would you rate your level of interest in the following?" Bolded percentages at the top of each bar reflect high interest: Combined "Very interested" and "Somewhat interested" responses.

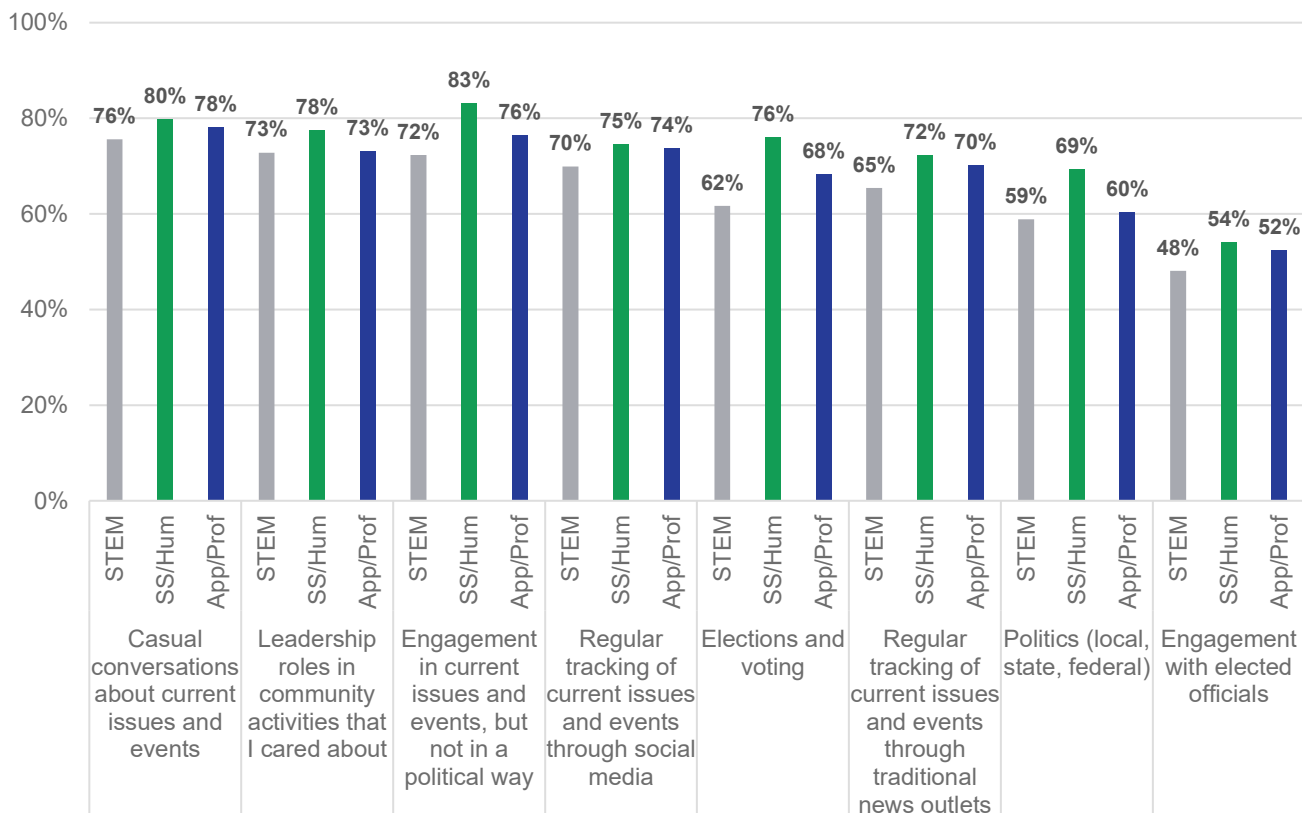
We found the largest gaps between other AP course areas and the AP Capstone courses in the Staying Informed and Political Life domains. AP Capstone students were more likely to report high current interest in political activities, as well as engagement with elected officials. AP Capstone students were also more likely to report high interest and engagement in reliable information skills. Finally, we found that 64% of AP Capstone students, compared to 60% of AP Social Science students and 61% of AP STEM students, reported high interest in exchanging perspectives with those dissimilar to them. All these are areas that align greatly with Capstone's course objectives, including research and analysis skills and collaboration.

Differences by college freshmen's intended major

When we investigated differences across the four civic domains by college freshmen's intended major, students interested in the Social Sciences/Humanities generally showed higher civic disposition and interest, followed by applied and professional studies students, with STEM students trailing behind on most items.

Similar to the AP course taking findings, results reported in Figure 13 indicated that the largest gaps were driven by interest in activities in the Political Life and Staying Informed domains. Regarding Political Life, more than three-quarters of Social Sciences/Humanities students reported interest in elections and voting (76%), compared to 68% of Applied/Professional students and 62% of STEM students. Following the same trend, 69% of Social Sciences/Humanities students were interested in politics generally, compared to approximately 59% of STEM and 60% of Applied/Professional students.

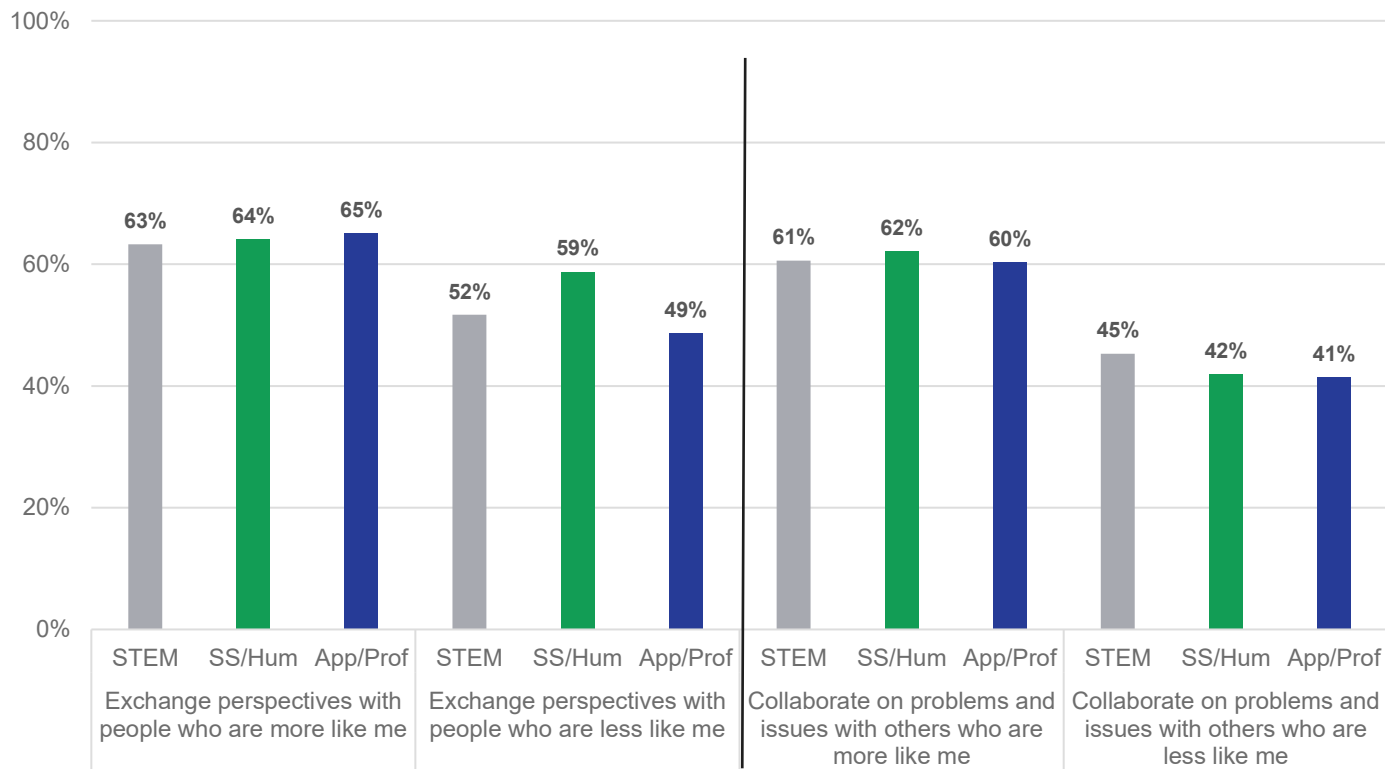
Figure 13. Percentage of college freshman across various intended majors expressing high interest in civic activities



Note. "SS/Hum" refers to majors that are characterized as either Social Sciences or Humanities, and "App/Prof" refers to majors in the Applied/Professional fields. Survey question asks: "How would you rate your level of interest in the following?" Bolded percentages at the top of each bar reflect high interest: Combined "Very interested" and "Somewhat interested" responses.

There was one exception to this trend. As shown in the right panel of Figure 14, STEM students actually reported the highest interest in collaborating with people who hold *different* beliefs of the three groups (45% vs. 42% for Social Sciences and 41% for Applied/Professional). That said, in terms of interest in exchanging perspectives with people who are less similar, students intending to major in Social Sciences/Humanities are much more likely to express high interest (59%) than those with other intended majors (52% for STEM and 49% for Applied/Professional).

Figure 14. Percentage of college freshman across various intended majors expressing high interest in working with others



Note. "SS/Hum" refers to majors that are characterized as either Social Sciences or Humanities, and "App/Prof" refers to majors in the Applied/Professional fields. Survey questions ask: "How would you rate your level of interest in each of the following?" "High" interest/engagement = 7 or above on a 0–10 scale. Bolded percentages at the top of each bar reflect high interest:

Conclusion and Next Steps

This research set out to explore a common narrative with new data: That young people are disengaged from civic life and disinterested in the issues shaping the country's future. Our findings echo youth civic engagement experts who claim this narrative is a myth. Students graduating from high school and entering college in 2025 reported broad interest in civic life. While their interest was generally concentrated outside of formal political channels, both high school seniors and college freshman recognized that their educational experiences served multiple roles, preparing them for both careers and civic life.

Given that civic identity, defined as one's sense of self as a participant in civic life, is theorized to form during the transition between high school and postsecondary experiences (Youniss & Yates, 1999), our analysis deepens understanding of how young people perceive their skills, skills of their peers, and how they intend to engage in their communities. We found:

- Roughly three in four high school graduates and college freshmen (72%–79%) reported high interest in community leadership roles and in current events, even outside a classroom or club.

Two-thirds also indicated high interest in voting. Interest dropped by roughly half, to 43%–48%, for more formal engagement, specifically, with elected officials. Efforts to engage students could build on these stated preferences while considering the utility of offering opportunities to build interest in other activities that are less preferred.

- Students were confident in their own civic skills but more skeptical of their peers': more than two-thirds rated themselves strong on understanding perspectives of others, openness to having their beliefs challenged, and discussing controversial issues, yet rated their peers substantially lower on the same skills. In fact, around 25% of high school students found this type of dialogue and perspective-taking to be a *weakness* for their peers. Both high school and college students preferred to engage with people more like them rather than less like them. Civic engagement programs that develop ability to engage with peers on difficult issues – particularly peers who may differ in meaningful ways – may directly address some of these reported gaps.
- Demographic and community characteristics shaped these patterns in ways that varied meaningfully by domain. Race/ethnicity was the most consistent differentiator across domains, including political life, while gender was most associated with interest in community life, and urbanicity was most associated with interest in staying informed. These differences suggest that efforts to develop programs that engage young people in civic life should consider the types of students they are intending to reach or influence, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
- For high schools students who took AP courses, the type of AP course taken was one of the strongest differentiators in our sample. Students who took AP Research or AP Seminar, courses explicitly designed to develop transferable academic skills including research, critical thinking, evidence-based argument, collaboration, writing, and presentation, expressed the most interest in nearly every civic skill and activity when compared to AP students who did not take these courses.
- Intended college major produced similar gaps, with students intending to major in the Social Sciences/Humanities more likely to report civic interest than intended STEM or Applied/Professional majors on most, though not all, measures.
- Consistent with developmental research demonstrating that a sense of purpose in adolescence requires building both personal and civic meaning, high school and college students reported that their educational experiences developed both career *and* civic skills. However, when college freshman were asked to select the *single* most important outcome of their college education, they rated the practical value of career preparation as most important. Youth engagement programs may seek to identify both career and civic tie-ins for participating students.

Together, these findings suggest that civic disengagement, where it exists, is narrower and more specific than the prevailing narrative following from recent polling might suggest. For the students we surveyed, when they expressed lack of interest or intention to engage, it was primarily related to formal political participation rather than engaging in civic and community life broadly.

Overall, this brief provides a descriptive look at civic interests of students who graduated from high school in 2025. Future research will explore this graduating cohort more deeply, drawing on roughly 2,400 students who completed both the High School Graduate and College Freshman Surveys. In this upcoming research, we will investigate the extent to which high school students' reported interest in *future* engagement in a variety of civic activities predicts their reported engagement once they are in college. Additionally, we will consider how particular features of their college experience (e.g., whether they attend a college that offers civic engagement programming or whether they attend college in a state different than the state they attended high school) are related to their perceptions of civic skills or interests.

Finally, we will repeat this analysis with an additional cohort. High school graduates of 2026 completed a survey with the same set of items, and in winter 2027, we will survey those graduates to learn more about their college or career activities, and how they view their civic interests.

These upcoming analyses will allow us to not only further describe young people's interests and activities, but also offer considerations for high schools, colleges, and other organizations seeking to promote young people's civic interest, engagement, and skills.

Appendix A: Item-to-Domain Mapping

Domain	Item	Outcome Type
Dialogue & Perspective-Taking	Casual conversations about current issues and events (not in a classroom or club)	Interest
	Exchanging perspectives with people who are more like me	Interest
	Exchanging perspectives with people who are less like me	Interest
	Collaborating on problems and issues with others who are more like me	Interest
	Collaborating on problems and issues with others who are less like me	Interest
	Engagement in exchanging perspectives with people who are more like me	Engagement
	Engagement in exchanging perspectives with people who are less like me	Engagement
	Engagement in collaborating on problems and issues with others who are more like me	Engagement
	Engagement in collaborating on problems and issues with others who are less like me	Engagement
	Openness to having own views challenged	Skills: Self
	Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues	Skills: Self
	Ability to see others' perspectives	Skills: Self
	Openness to having own views challenged (peer rating)	Skills: Peers
	Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues (peer rating)	Skills: Peers
	Ability to see others' perspectives (peer rating)	Skills: Peers
Staying Informed	Regular tracking of current issues and events through traditional news outlets	Interest
	Regular tracking of current issues and events through social media	Interest
	Learning more about getting & analyzing reliable information about current issues & events	Interest
	Engagement in learning more about getting & analyzing reliable information about current issues & events	Engagement
Community Life	Engaging in current issues and events, but not in a political way	Interest
	Leadership roles in community activities that I care about	Interest
	Participating in community activities	Interest
	Engagement in participating in community activities	Engagement
Political Life	Elections & voting	Interest
	Politics (local, state, federal)	Interest
	Engaging with elected officials	Interest
	Participating in political activities, clubs, etc.	Interest
	Engagement in participating in political activities	Engagement

Appendix B: Item-level responses by subgroup

Table B1. Percent of respondents indicating high interest and high engagement in dialogue and perspective-taking activities

Survey	Interest: Casual conversation about current issues and events (not in a classroom or club)		Interest: Exchanging perspectives with people who are more like me		Interest: Exchanging perspectives with people who are less like me		Interest: Collaborating on problems and issues with others who are more like me		Interest: Collaborating on problems and issues with others who are less like me		Engagement in exchanging perspectives with people who are more like me		Engagement in exchanging perspectives with people who are less like me		Engagement in collaborating on problems and issues with others who are more like me		Engagement in collaborating on problems and issues with others who are less like me	
	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS
Gender																		
Male	77%	76%	67%	61%	57%	51%	69%	63%	46%	42%	62%	53%	49%	43%	56%	49%	41%	38%
Female	80%	78%	66%	63%	55%	50%	65%	61%	43%	42%	63%	57%	47%	43%	56%	49%	39%	37%
Parent Education Level																		
Bachelor's Degree +	81%	79%	67%	63%	59%	53%	68%	62%	47%	44%	65%	58%	49%	45%	59%	51%	40%	38%
No Bachelor's Degree	78%	77%	67%	64%	52%	47%	65%	62%	42%	41%	63%	54%	48%	42%	55%	47%	41%	37%
Race/Ethnicity																		
Asian			72%	65%	56%	50%	73%	62%	45%	42%	65%	54%	47%	40%	62%	52%	42%	37%
Black			71%	69%	53%	52%	69%	66%	46%	49%	65%	61%	49%	44%	61%	53%	41%	40%
Hispanic			65%	64%	53%	49%	64%	65%	42%	41%	61%	56%	46%	42%	54%	47%	39%	38%
White			63%	59%	57%	51%	64%	59%	44%	42%	62%	54%	47%	43%	55%	48%	38%	36%
Two or More Races			69%	61%	58%	52%	68%	59%	48%	41%	67%	58%	50%	46%	58%	54%	41%	35%
Urbanicity																		
Urban			63%	62%	55%	51%	63%	62%	45%	43%	62%	56%	46%	42%	55%	47%	39%	37%
Suburban			66%	62%	54%	49%	65%	62%	43%	43%	63%	55%	47%	43%	56%	50%	38%	38%
Rural			65%	62%	53%	51%	64%	57%	42%	40%	59%	55%	46%	41%	54%	47%	40%	33%
Town			65%	66%	53%	48%	63%	60%	38%	37%	60%	57%	44%	37%	50%	48%	35%	36%

Table B2. Percent of respondents indicating strengths for themselves and peers

Survey	Openness to having own views challenged		Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues		Ability to see others' perspectives		Peers: Openness to having views challenged		Peers: Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues		Peers: Ability to see others' perspectives	
	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS
Gender												
Male	72%	76%	74%	73%	77%	77%	44%	55%	53%	60%	46%	56%
Female	70%	72%	70%	69%	82%	84%	33%	52%	45%	59%	38%	56%
Parents' Education												
Bachelor's Degree +	71%	74%	74%	73%	82%	83%	35%	52%	50%	59%	40%	55%
No Bachelor's Degree	69%	73%	69%	69%	79%	82%	37%	55%	42%	59%	40%	59%
Race/Ethnicity												
Asian	67%	74%	64%	65%	82%	80%	42%	58%	54%	62%	46%	62%
Black	71%	72%	70%	71%	79%	81%	45%	54%	52%	59%	47%	54%
Hispanic	71%	75%	68%	71%	79%	83%	43%	58%	47%	63%	45%	61%
White	71%	73%	75%	73%	81%	83%	29%	47%	43%	55%	35%	52%
Two or More Races	71%	75%	76%	73%	82%	80%	35%	50%	54%	59%	39%	53%
Urbanicity												
Urban	70%	73%	70%	70%	79%	82%	42%	54%	53%	60%	46%	57%
Suburban	72%	74%	72%	70%	80%	82%	35%	53%	46%	59%	40%	57%
Rural	69%	74%	71%	72%	82%	82%	32%	51%	41%	56%	35%	53%
Town	68%	72%	72%	70%	80%	81%	31%	47%	36%	53%	30%	52%

Table B3. Percent of students indicating high interest in activities to stay informed about current events

Survey	Regular tracking of current issues and events through traditional news outlets		Regular tracking of current issues and events through social media		Learning more about getting & analyzing reliable information about current issues & events		Engagement in learning more about getting & analyzing reliable information about current issues & events	
	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS
Gender								
Male	60%	64%	67%	67%	57%	54%	53%	46%
Female	63%	67%	72%	73%	53%	54%	48%	43%
Parents' Education								
Bachelor's Degree +	64%	66%	71%	71%	58%	54%	52%	45%
No Bachelor's Degree	62%	67%	71%	74%	54%	54%	50%	44%
Race/Ethnicity								
Asian	65%	69%	73%	73%	61%	55%	52%	45%
Black	61%	68%	73%	76%	55%	57%	50%	50%
Hispanic	64%	69%	73%	77%	54%	55%	50%	45%
White	61%	63%	68%	67%	54%	52%	49%	42%
Two or More Races	65%	66%	71%	75%	59%	50%	53%	46%
Urbanicity								
Urban	65%	68%	71%	74%	54%	56%	50%	43%
Suburban	62%	67%	71%	72%	55%	53%	50%	45%
Rural	57%	63%	68%	67%	50%	49%	48%	42%
Town	55%	56%	64%	67%	50%	47%	45%	40%

Table B4. Percent of students indicating high interest in community activities

Survey	Engaging in current issues and events, but not in a political way		Leadership roles in community activities that I care about		Participating in community activities		Engagement in participating in community activities	
	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS
Gender								
Male	73%	70%	70%	65%	53%	46%	49%	41%
Female	76%	78%	78%	75%	65%	58%	60%	48%
Parents' Education								
Bachelor's Degree +	77%	77%	78%	73%	64%	57%	59%	49%
No Bachelor's Degree	75%	75%	72%	70%	56%	50%	52%	43%
Race/Ethnicity								
Asian	77%	75%	79%	74%	64%	55%	60%	47%
Black	75%	78%	76%	75%	60%	61%	58%	48%
Hispanic	74%	76%	72%	70%	55%	48%	52%	44%
White	75%	75%	75%	72%	59%	55%	56%	45%
Two or More Races	79%	72%	76%	66%	60%	57%	54%	48%
Urbanicity								
Urban	75%	77%	73%	72%	57%	55%	53%	45%
Suburban	75%	75%	74%	71%	58%	53%	54%	46%
Rural	74%	74%	73%	70%	59%	54%	55%	46%
Town	74%	71%	73%	77%	55%	51%	56%	44%

Table B5. Percent of students indicating high interest in political activities

	Elections & voting		Politics (local, state, federal)		Engaging with elected officials		Participating in political activities, clubs, etc.		Engagement in participating in political activities	
Survey	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS	HSG	CFS
Gender										
Male	62%	63%	57%	57%	43%	48%	31%	28%	27%	26%
Female	66%	69%	57%	61%	42%	48%	32%	25%	27%	21%
Parents' Education										
Bachelor's Degree +	69%	68%	60%	61%	44%	47%	34%	27%	28%	23%
No Bachelor's Degree	60%	67%	55%	60%	43%	50%	31%	26%	28%	22%
Race/Ethnicity										
Asian	60%	61%	54%	55%	41%	45%	33%	25%	29%	22%
Black	60%	68%	53%	62%	44%	56%	34%	30%	32%	26%
Hispanic	63%	69%	57%	61%	44%	52%	32%	27%	28%	24%
White	68%	68%	59%	60%	42%	45%	30%	25%	24%	20%
Two or More Races	69%	70%	62%	62%	44%	45%	34%	27%	30%	26%
Urbanicity										
Urban	66%	69%	59%	61%	45%	50%	32%	27%	28%	21%
Suburban	64%	67%	57%	60%	42%	48%	31%	26%	26%	23%
Rural	63%	67%	55%	59%	41%	44%	29%	25%	26%	22%
Town	65%	68%	54%	56%	40%	44%	29%	24%	25%	21%

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