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Civic Learning & Engagement

Participation in Sports and Civic Engagement

By Mark Hugo Lopez, Research Director, and Kimberlee Moore, Research Assistant¹
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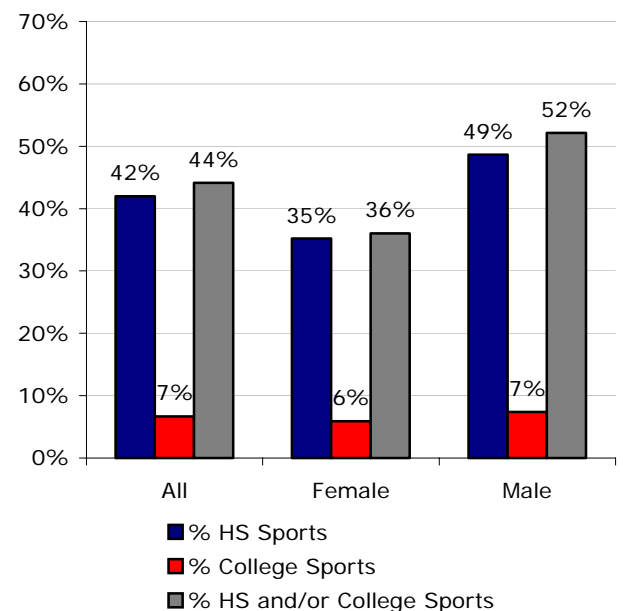
One of several reasons to offer sports in school is to teach young people values, skills, and habits that will make them more active, engaged, and responsible citizens. Past evidence on the civic effects of sports is mixed, but points to some potential positive civic effects.² This fact sheet uses recent data—the 2002 National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement—to identify some important positive relationships.³

Generally, we find that on some dimensions of civic engagement, such as voting, volunteering, and news attentiveness, youth who are involved in sports report higher average levels of civic engagement than their counterparts who do not participate in sports. It could be the case that people who choose to participate in sports also tend to choose to participate in politics and civic affairs, and sports is not the reason for their civic engagement. However, the relationship between sports and civic engagement remains even when we statistically control for the other factors that were measured in the survey. That result suggests, although it does not prove, that sports has positive civic effects for many young people.

Extent of High School Sports Participation

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), the number of students involved in sports has steadily increased over the past sixteen

Graph 1: Participation in Extramural Sports Teams while in HS and College among 18-25 year olds, 2002.



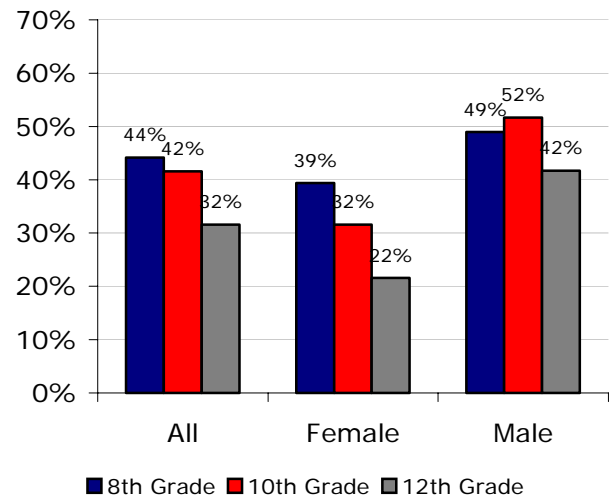
Source: National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement, 2002.

years. In the 2004-2005 school year, approximately 7 million high school students participated in athletic programs, up from 5.3 million in 1990.⁴

In 2002, about 42 percent of youth 18-25 had participated in organized sports during high school. Fewer females said they were involved in sports than males; 35 percent of females and 49 percent of males reported being involved in organized sports while in high school. See Graph 1.

While participation in sports activities in high school is common, particularly for males, the pattern of participation changes as a cohort ages and relatively fewer opportunities are available in later years of high school or college. By college, only 7 percent of 18-25 year olds reported participating in an organized sport. Similarly, according to the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), participation in organized sports activities for most young people peaks in junior high school, and falls off as individuals age. See Graph 2. Tabulations from NELS:88 also suggest that by age 25, 76 percent of the class of 1992 had participated in some organized sport since 8th grade.

Graph 2: Participation in Extramural Sports for the High School Class of 1992 from 1988 to 1992.



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Fourth Follow-up

Assessing the Relationship between Sports Participation and Civic Engagement

Generally, young people who have participated in high school sports are also more civically engaged than young people who have not participated in sports. Table 1 shows the percentage of young people who are civically engaged, dividing the youth population into sports participants and non-participants and looking separately at males and females.. From these tabulations, it is clear that 18-25 year olds who participated in sports activities while in high school were more likely than non-participants to have:

- volunteered *
- volunteered regularly *
- worked to solve a community problem
- participated in a run/walk/ride charity fundraiser event
- registered to vote *
- voted in 2000 *
- boycotted a product or service
- felt comfortable about making a statement in a public meeting *
- watched the news closely (especially sports news) *

* On these five indicators, the differences between sports participants and non-participants are statistically significant.

Among young women, those who have participated in sports are more likely to be engaged in volunteering, regular volunteering, registering to vote, voting in 2000, feeling comfortable making a public statement, following the news, and boycotting than young women who did not participate in sports. Among young men, a similar pattern is evident, except that young men who participated in sports are no more or less likely to boycott a product than those who did not participate in sports while in high school. In the area of news attentiveness, young male sports participants indicated a greater interest in following the news, particularly sports news, than their female sports counterparts or their male non-sports counterparts.

Table 1 – Civic Engagement Among Sports Participants and non-Participants Percentages of Each Group Who Are Engaged in Various Ways (Unadjusted) National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement 2002, Ages 18-25

	All Young People 18-25		Females 18-25		Males 18-25	
	<i>Sports Participants</i>	<i>Sports non- Participants</i>	<i>Sports Participants</i>	<i>Sports non- Participants</i>	<i>Sports Participants</i>	<i>Sports non- Participants</i>
<i>Civic Indicators</i>						
Volunteer	31.9	20.9***	36.2	20.2***	28.8	21.8***
Regular Volunteer	15.4	9.7**	19.2	11.4*	12.7	7.6*
Can Make A Difference	30.4	28.2	32.1	32.4	29.2	22.9
Worked to Solve Comm. Problem	7.4	5.8	10.8	6.2	4.9	5.2
Participated in Run, walk, ride	8.5	6.2	10.6	8.1	7.0	3.8
<i>Political Indicators</i>						
Registered to Vote	57.8	40.1***	62.6	44.2***	54.3	34.9***
Voted in 2000	44.1	32.5**	49.1	34.1**	40.4	30.2**
<i>Voice Indicators</i>						
Wrote Letter	5.5	5.4	8.1	3.7	3.7	7.6
Boycott	16.3	12.3	21.4	13.3**	12.7	11.1
Participated in Town Meeting	5.6	6.5	7.5	4.5	4.3	9.1
Signed Email Petition	9.6	11.4	12.0	12.6	8.0	9.9
Signed Written Petition	13.0	13.7	14.7	12.1	11.8	15.6
Feel Comfortable Making Public Statement	39.7	31.5**	43.4	28.6***	37.0	35.1***
<i>News Attentiveness</i>						
Watch General News Closely	40.5	25.9***	37.6	25.9**	42.6	26.1**

Watch Sports News Closely	34.1	13.6***	15.4	6.2**	47.5	22.9**
Watch Political News Closely	7.9	3.9**	6.1	2.7*	9.2	5.3*
Sample Size	362	513	161	302	201	211

Source: Authors' tabulations from the National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement, 2002. ***, **, and * indicate a statistically significant difference between sports participants and non-participants at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels of statistical significance respectively.

Difficulties in Interpreting the Effect of Sports Participation on Civic Engagement

While these preliminary results are suggestive that participation in sports is associated with greater civic engagement, it is likely that the very factors that lead a student to participate in an organized sport in high school, and to succeed at it, are also associated with a greater likelihood of civic engagement. In other words, these differences may not be entirely due to participation in sports, but likely are a result of other factors that make an individual join a sports team *AND* more engaged civically (for an extended discussion of the many selection issues associated with measuring the impact of sports participation on civic engagement, see CIRCLE Working Paper 42 by Robert Fullinwider entitled "Sports, Youth, and Character: A Critical Survey"). To address this issue, we present evidence of the difference in the likelihood of being civically engaged between sports youth and non-sports youth for our civic engagement measures, once observable characteristics are controlled. These observable factors (i.e., ones measured in our survey) are race/ethnicity, gender, age, educational attainment, marital status, income, family size, internet web-use, club membership in high school, and region and metropolitan statistical area (MSA) status. Our results overall suggest that a some of the relationship between sports participation and civic engagement is driven by these other factors. Nevertheless, young people who have participated in sports are indeed more engaged in some civic activities once these observable factors are controlled.

Below we present our evidence from multivariate analyses by showing the predicted level of civic engagement once these observable factors are controlled. Table 2 summarizes our results for all outcomes, and Graphs 3 through 11 document selected unadjusted and adjusted civic engagement for sports and non-sports youth for outcomes where differences between both groups were statistically significant in the adjusted results.⁵

**Table 2 – Civic Engagement Among Sports Participants and non-Participants
Percentages of Each Group who are Engaged in Various Ways
(Unadjusted and Adjusted Percentages)
National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement 2002, Ages 18-25**

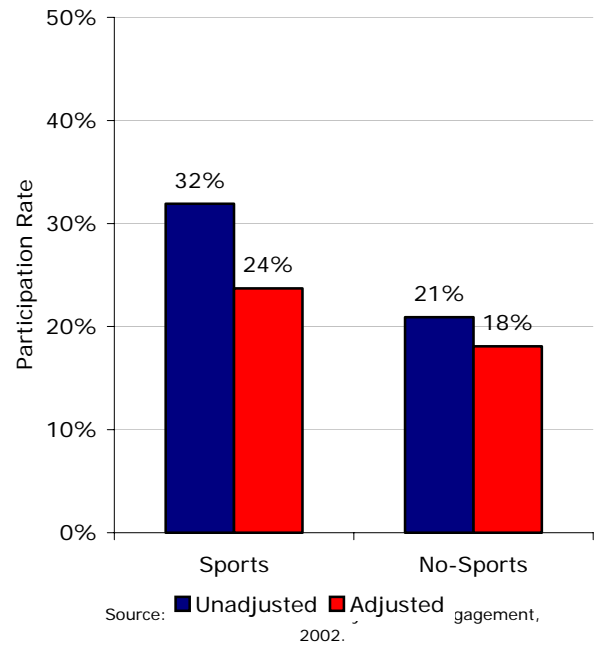
	Unadjusted Percentages			Adjusted Percentages		
	<i>Sports Participants</i>	<i>Sports non-Participants</i>	<i>Difference in percentage points</i>	<i>Sports Participants</i>	<i>Sports non-Participants</i>	<i>Difference in percentage points</i>
<i>Civic Indicators</i>						
Volunteer	31.9	20.9	11***	23.7	18.1	5.6
Regular Volunteer	15.4	9.7	5.7**	9.7	7.1	2.6
Can Make A Difference	30.4	28.2	2.2	29.1	26.8	2.3
Worked to Solve Comm. Problem	7.4	5.8	1.6	5.1	3.8	1.3
Participated in Run, walk, ride	8.5	6.2	2.3	5.7	5.1	0.6
<i>Political Indicators</i>						
Registered to Vote	57.8	40.1	17.7***	59.3	44.3	15***
Voted in 2000	44.1	32.5	11.6**	42.8	33.4	9.4*
<i>Voice Indicators</i>						
Wrote Letter	5.5	5.4	0.1	2.7	3.5	-0.8
Boycott	16.3	12.3	4	12.2	11.5	0.7
Participated in Town Meeting	5.6	6.5	-0.9	3.3	3.8	-0.5
Signed Email Petition	9.6	11.4	-1.8	5.7	9.8	-4.1*
Signed Written Petition	13.0	13.7	-0.7	10.1	12.8	-2.7
Feel Comfortable Making Public Statement	39.7	31.5	8.2***	37.7	30.0	7.7*
<i>News Attentiveness</i>						
Watch General News Closely	40.5	25.9	14.6***	40.6	27.1	13.5***
Watch Sports News Closely	34.1	13.6	20.5***	28.4	10.0	18.4***
Watch Political News Closely	7.9	3.9	4.0**	4.2	2.7	1.5
Sample Size	362	513		362	513	

Source: Authors' tabulations from the National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement, 2002. ***, **, and * indicate a statistically significant difference between sports participants and non-participants at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels of statistical significance respectively. Adjusted percentages are predicted probabilities based on a model that controls for gender, race/ethnicity, age, marital status, educational attainment, other high school activity involvement, work status, income status, region, MSA status, college student status, number of kids in household, household size, internet use, household head status, and rent status. This model was estimated for 18-25 year olds. All results are weighted.

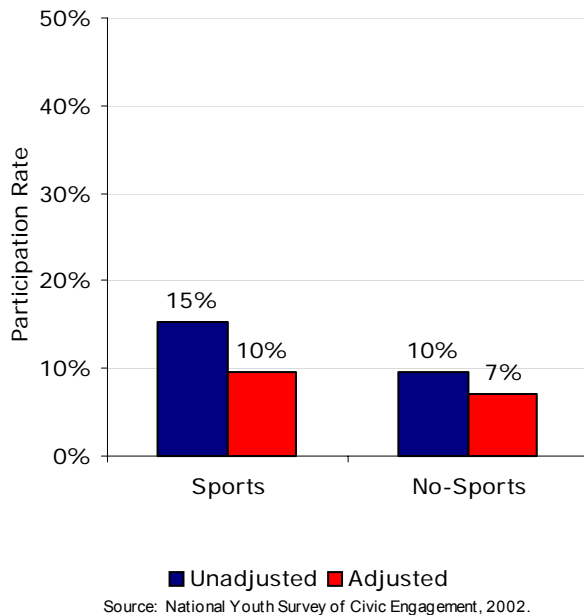
Civic Indicators

Youth who participated in sports were more likely to volunteer and volunteer regularly, even once observable factors were controlled. Specifically, sports youth were more likely to volunteer by 11 percentage points (32 percent versus 21 percent) when making an unadjusted comparison of volunteering rates. However, once observable factors are controlled, the difference in volunteering rates is still a statistically significant 6 percentage points (24 percent versus 18 percent). While we cannot attribute the adjusted difference entirely to sports participation, it is likely that sports participants are engaging in a higher volunteering level than their non-sports counterparts, and some of this difference is due to the effect of sports participation. See Graph 3.

Graph 3: Sports Participation and Volunteering; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.



Graph 4: Sports Participation and Regular Volunteering; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.

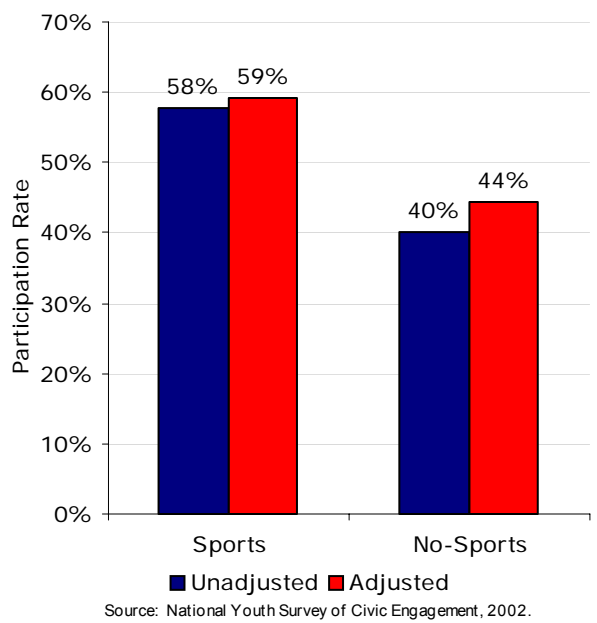


A similar pattern of a reduced difference in participation rates is evident for regular volunteering. In fact, approximately half of the observed difference in unadjusted regular volunteering rates between sports youth and non-sports youth is explained by observable characteristics. See Graph 4.

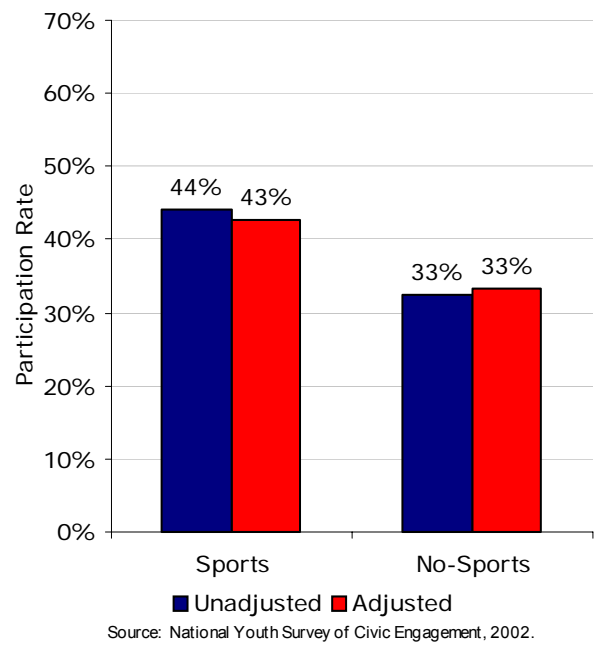
Political Indicators

Young people involved in sports in high school were more likely to be registered to vote and vote in the 2000 election than non-sports youth. Controlling for observable factors does not change this relationship. See Graphs 5 and 6.

Graph 5: Sports Participation and Being Registered to Vote; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.



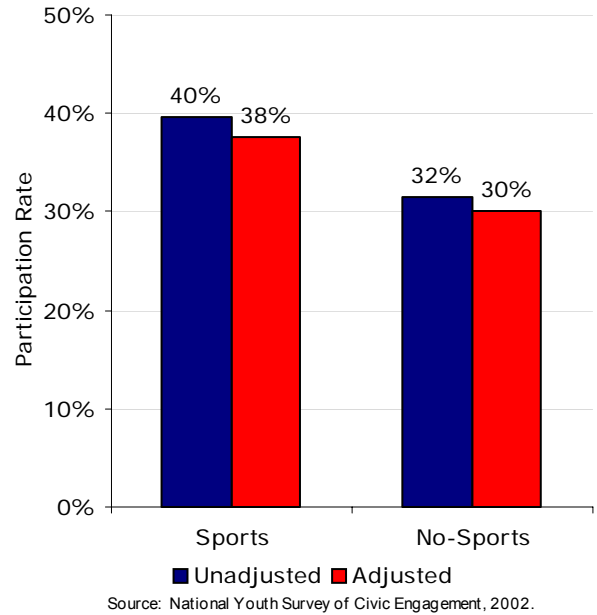
Graph 6: Sports Participation and Voting in 2000; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.



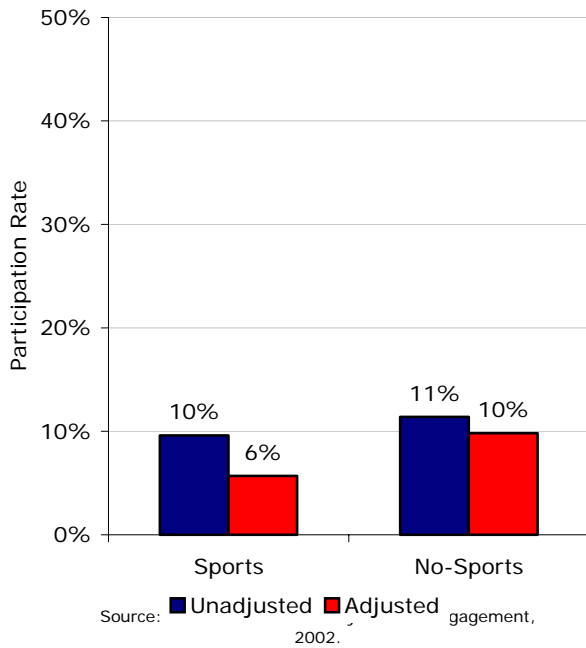
Indicators of Political Voice

Generally sports involvement seems to have little significant impact on activities associated with indicators of “political voice” (various ways of making one’s opinion known). However, in two measures of political voice, there are slight positive relationships with sports participation. Sports youth are 8 percentage points more likely to say they feel comfortable making a public statement than no-sports youth, even once observable factors are controlled. See Graph 7. In contrast, sports participants are less likely to say they signed an email petition, once other factors are controlled, than non-sports youth. See Graph 8.

Graph 7: Sports Participation and Making a Public Statement; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.



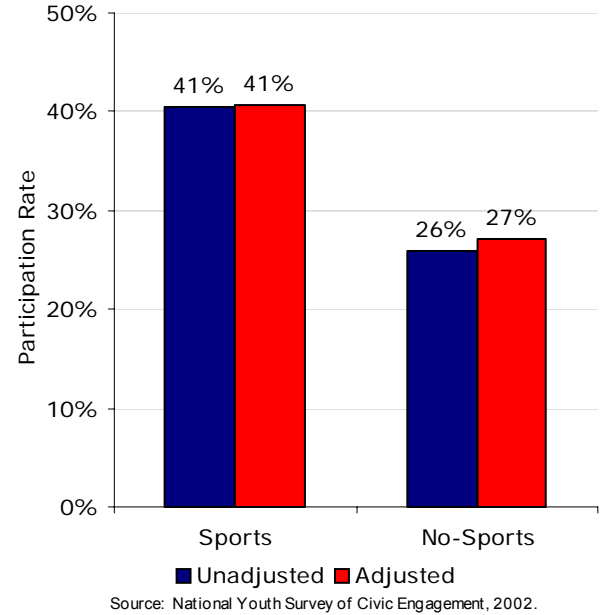
Graph 8: Sports Participation and Signing an Email Petition; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.



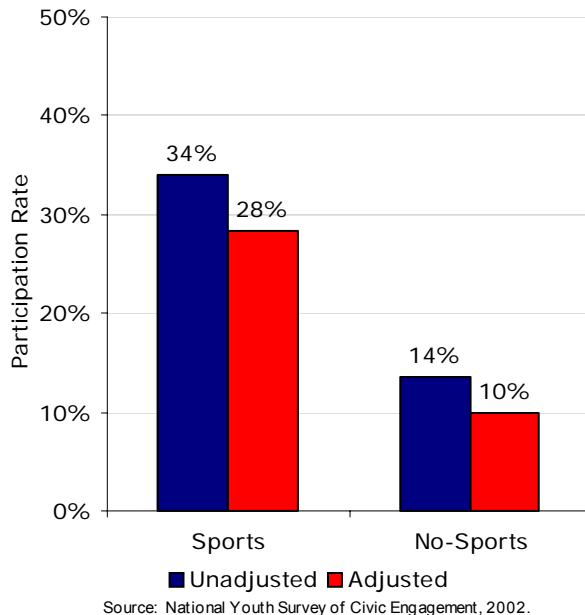
Indicators of News Attentiveness

Sports youth are more likely to say they watch the news than their non-sports counterparts. This is especially true of sports news, though in the area of political news, sports youth are still more likely to say they watch closely more so than their non-sports counterparts. This is true once observable factors are controlled. In the case of attentiveness to general news, controlling for observable factors does little to reduce the difference between sports and non-sports participants. See Graphs 9, 10, and 11.

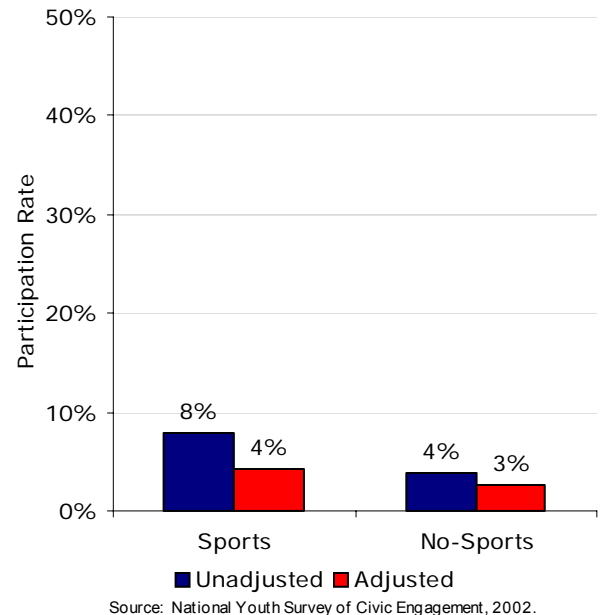
Graph 9: Sports Participation and Following the News Closely; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.



Graph 10: Sports Participation and Following Sports News Closely; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.



Graph 11: Sports Participation and Following Political News Closely; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.



Notes

¹ We thank Peter Levine, Emily Hoban Kirby, and Abby Kiesa for comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in interpretation are our own.

² For example, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, found no positive relationship between high school sports participation and adult political participation, based on a survey conducted in 1989. See *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 424. An analysis of longitudinal data from High School and Beyond found no impact on adult political behavior depending on whether high school students participated in a basket of non-“instrumental” extracurricular activities, which included sports. In that study, student government, school newspaper, debating, and other “instrumental” activities did have positive effects. See Jennifer Glanville, “Political Socialization or Selection? Adolescent Extracurricular Participation and Political Activity in Early Adulthood.” *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 80, no. 2 (June 1999), pp. 279-290. On the other hand, while various studies cited by Robert Fullinwider in CIRCLE Working Paper 42, “Sports, Youth, and Sport: A Critical Survey,” show that youth sports participation has positive affects on character, many of these studies suffer from self-selection problems or offer no conclusions about causation. In addition, Fullinwider reports that for the most part, studies that show sports participation as beneficial do not answer important structural and cost-benefit questions.

³ The National Youth Survey 2002 was part of a larger survey effort to develop and measure a set of 19 measures of civic engagement. This survey was one of three that formed the basis for the report [The Civic and Political Health of the Nation](#), released in September of 2002 by CIRCLE. See http://www.civicyouth.org/practitioners/Core_Indicators_Page.htm for a full listing of all 19 measures of civic engagement available.

⁴ See the 2004-2005 High School Athletics Participation Survey report. According to that report, male youth are most likely to participate in football, and female youth are most likely to participate in basketball. Since the 1970-1971, participation in sports generally fallen as school enrollments have declined, and risen in recent years as more young people enter high school each year.

⁵ We only present results for the entire sample of young people ages 18-25; results by gender are available on request, but the models estimated for females and males separately were generally unstable because of small sample sizes and limited variation in some controls.