

CENTER FOR CIVIC EDUCATION



*Voting and Political Participation  
of We the People: The Citizen and  
the Constitution Alumni in the  
2004 Election*

Center for Civic Education



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## Executive Summary

Between November 2004, and March 2005, the Center for Civic Education conducted a survey of alumni from the **We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution** program. Altogether, 522 alumni responded, ranging in age from 18–34. The primary focus of the study was on voting and other forms of political engagement. Due to self-selection by respondents, these findings should be considered as suggestive rather than generalizable to all **We the People** alumni.

**We the People** alumni were compared with a national probability study from the 2004 *National Election Studies* (NES) of other young Americans their age. In other questions, alumni were also compared with over 289,000 American college freshmen (*The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2004*). Among alumni eligible to vote in 2004, key findings are:

- 92% of alumni reported voting in November 2000, in contrast to 78% of those surveyed in the NES study
- 85% of alumni said they had voted in all previous elections
- 63% reported being very interested in national politics and national affairs
- 53% of alumni read the newspaper often, while 64% paid a great deal of attention to stories on politics and public issues, whereas 41% of NES respondents had not read a daily newspaper in the past week, 30% of NES respondents said they had not watched a national television news broadcast in the past week
- 83% of alumni held that it was essential or very important to keep current with political affairs in contrast to only 34% of American college freshmen
- 60% of alumni discussed national politics and affairs every day or nearly every day

- Since January 2003, 26% of respondents had volunteered to work for a candidate running for office; 16% had made a financial campaign contribution; 29% had taken part in a protest, march or demonstration on a national or local issue; fewer than 4% of NES respondents had taken part in any of these activities
- 34% of alumni, in contrast to 13% of NES respondents, had contacted a federal elected official or staff; 41% had contacted state or local level elected officials or their staff
- 65% of alumni thought influencing the political structure was essential or very important, while only 20% of college freshmen agreed
- 58% of alumni felt becoming a community leader was essential or very important, in contrast to 31% of college freshmen

In summary, **We the People** alumni surveyed are better informed and more politically engaged than their peers.

## Background of the 2004–5 Alumni Survey

Since the inception of the **We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution** program in 1987, 26.5 million students and 82,000 educators have participated in this innovative course of study.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1998, the Center for Civic Education has offered program graduates an opportunity to become members of the Alumni Network. Using the addresses submitted by alumni between November 2004, and March 2005, the Center invited them to take part in a survey.<sup>2</sup> Altogether, 522 alumni participated.

These results are not generalizable to all alumni because, as mentioned, the sample is drawn from alumni who volunteered to be part of a network. Students who were more engaged in **We the People** may have chosen to participate in the Alumni Network. Results may therefore be biased toward higher levels of political engagement than might be found among all alumni.

“Citizen participation is at the heart of democracy,”<sup>3</sup> and this study examines activities such as voting and other forms of political participation.

It should be noted, however, that the goal of the **We the People** program is broader than fostering informed political participation. The program seeks to promote civic competence and responsibility among the nation's elementary and secondary students. Alumni comments reveal that, at least for some, the program has had this effect in their lives. According to one, participating "gave me a deep understanding of the philosophical framework of our government, as well as intimate knowledge of how our government works. Thus, I have a greater understanding of government and politics due to the **We The People** program." Another wrote, "It made what had previously been fairly abstract concepts of governance and civic responsibility concrete and relevant to my day to day life." A third wrote that participating "increased my feelings of civic responsibility. It made the constitution and our laws seem less like pieces of paper and more like human declarations."

In this study, alumni were hypothesized to and found to possess high levels of commitment to participating in the political process as evidenced through their comments and reporting of their political participation. Wrote one, "When you can get people educated and keep their interest long enough to show them they have a part in government and let people have some power, it is incredible how that keeps people involved and interested." Another stated that participating in the program "taught me to appreciate how our government works, and that it's not nearly as easy as it looks. It also made me aware of how it is my responsibility to become involved in our government."

For many respondents, participating in the program awakened their budding interest in politics. "My participation in the program made me aware of the political world around me, and instilled in me the value of civic virtue and activism" wrote an alum. A common comment voiced by alumni was that participating in **We the People** "was my first real experience with it and participating in it got me interested in politics." Another, "**We the People** changed my life. I will graduate with a degree in Political Science and Journalism this May, and hope to influence policy throughout my career. Without We the People, I would have never tapped into the passion I have for government." For a small number of alumni, this was not the case, and the program "did not affect my attitude toward politics. I was already political before I took the class."

For a basis of comparison with **We the People** alumni, data from the 2004 National Election Study (NES) are used. The 2004 NES is a national probability study, consisting of two waves, before and after the 2004

elections. Alumni are compared with 332 NES respondents within the same age category, 18–34. There are some differences in the two samples. First, alumni tended to be younger—52% ranged in age from 18–20, doubtless due to the recency within which they graduated from high school. In the national probability sample, respondents are nearly evenly distributed between ages 18 and 34. Age differences were reflected in respondents' educational attainment: the highest degree earned by 59% of alumni was a high school diploma, while in the nationally representative study, 27% had terminated their education with high school. Alumni are also comparatively less educated, a factor known to depress political participation.

Both samples include more females than males, 11% in the alumni study, and 4% in the comparison group. Whites comprised 79% of alumni surveyed but only 65% in the NES. In summary, the alumni tend to be younger, less educated, predominately white, and female, as opposed to the national study.

## Voting

*We the People* made me more aware of the citizen's duty in a representative democracy and it has allowed me to understand the political process. This places a lot more emphasis on elections and voting in my mind. –Alum

Low voter turnout has been the norm for America's youngest political cohorts. U.S. Census Bureau turnout from 1998, an off-year election, revealed 17% turnout among 18–24 year olds.<sup>4</sup> Using data from three exit polls, CIRACLE estimates turnout of 18–24 year olds at 42%, with 59% of those aged 25–29 voting. While this is an increase from 53% who voted in 2000, turnout increased among all age groups proportionally in 2004.<sup>5</sup> 18–29 year olds represent about 18% of the electorate.

Among alumni eligible to vote, 92% reported voting in November 2004. In addition, 85% indicated that they had voted in all previous elections. Participating in **We the People** “made me believe that voting is a civic duty and one vote does make a difference, and that individuals can work to affect politics.” This is encouraging given the historically low turnout of the

youngest cohorts. Among those surveyed in the National Election Study aged 18–34, 78% reported turning out to vote.

Some alumni reported they were working to increase turnout among their peers. Writes one, “I am currently interning with The New Voters Project which is a national grassroots campaign that has worked to increase young voter registration and turnout.”

## Other Forms of Political Participation

*The program made me more aware of how our government works and the importance in taking an active role in participating in local, state and national elections, as well as other aspects of the political process. – Alum*

More than one-third of alumni contacted their federal elected official or staff, while only 13% of NES respondents had done so. Even more alumni contacted their state and locally elected officials—41% reported making such contacts within the past year—and many are active on campus and in electoral politics. One alum wrote, “I was a College Volunteer for the Bush/Cheney campaign. I am the secretary for the College Republicans at the University of New Mexico. In my freshman year of college, I was the first female president for the college Republicans.” Another wrote, “I’m the co-founder and president of my college’s ACLU chapter. I volunteered for the Kerry/Edwards Campaign through ‘Rock the Vote.’”

In addition to contacting elected officials, 16% of alumni contributed financially to a campaign or candidate this past year. Twenty-nine percent had taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration. In contrast, fewer than 4% of respondents in the national sample captured by the 2004 NES had taken part in these activities. Alumni comments also reveal a strong sense that citizenship in a democracy requires monitoring and action on their part. “**We the People** gave me the context with which to critically analyze the actions of our government, an essential duty of the informed and responsible citizen.” A deep immersion into study of the nation’s history and constitution has led many alumni to value representative government and to seek accountability. According to one alum, “The **We the People** program made me expect more of my government; not in the form of

entitlement, but in performance. I now know what the Constitution says, and how it has been interpreted, and I fully expect our officials to follow it.”

Many alumni work or have worked for elected officials across the political spectrum. “I have worked for Congressman Henry Hyde’s office in Washington, D.C.; at another time in Washington, I worked for the Subcommittee for Middle East and Central Asia, part of the House’s International Relations Committee.” Another wrote, “I worked as a caseworker of U.S. Senator Carl Levin for two years following my undergraduate education and just prior to graduate study.” Another, “Since participating in the program in 2000, I have worked on two local campaigns, interned for U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, and just maintained a high level of interest in the political arena.” Others report working in state legislatures.

Higher levels of participation may reflect the importance that over half (57%) of alumni expressed in the importance of becoming a political leader. In contrast, only 31% of entering college freshmen thought that it was important or essential to become a community leader.<sup>6</sup>

## Political Information

Over 80% of alumni felt that it is essential or very important to keep current with political affairs. Sixty-three percent of alumni reported being very interested in national politics and national affairs, and an additional 29% were somewhat interested. Among NES respondents, only 30% were very much interested in following the political campaigns. One alum wrote, “My participation made me more aware of politics and the importance of being an informed citizen.” Another, “**We the People** made me much more interested and proud of our system of government. Now, I follow politics much more closely than I used to.”

Alumni are also better informed by reading newspapers and watching televised news programs at higher rates than their peers. When asked, “How often do you watch national news broadcasts on television?” 45% of alumni said very often, while only 4% answered never. Among NES respondents, 30% reported they had not watched national news on TV in the past week, while 20% had watched news for five or more days in the

past week. More than half, 53% of alumni, read the newspaper very often; of the national sample, 41% said they had not read the newspaper in the past week.

Sixty-four percent of alumni who read the paper said they paid a great deal of attention to stories on national and world politics and public affairs. **“We the People** made me so much more aware of what is happening in the political spectrum. It also taught me to think critically about something I may hear reported on the news. I've really learned to think with a more open mind,” wrote one alum.

## Discussion of Politics

Possessing higher levels of political information may increase alumni political interest and their confidence to discuss politics more often than their peers. Over 60% of alumni discussed political affairs with others every day or nearly every day. Among NES respondents, 16% had discussed politics five or more days in the past week. Further, 16% of the national sample never discussed politics with family and friends.

Alumni are politically diverse, and their comments reflect their appreciation of the need for political compromise. An alum wrote that participating in the program “also helped me to be able to understand opposing political views.” Another wrote, “It affected how I approach politics by teaching me how to think critically about both sides of an issue. It also taught me that there is more than one valid approach to all political and/or governmental issues.”

## Life Objectives

*I now understand why government is so important, and I better understand that though our system is not perfect, it is still the most perfect of a republic system. This is partly why I joined the Marine Corps . . . to help protect a few yellowed pieces of paper and the ideals behind them. – Alum*



How committed to social activism is this emerging cohort? *The American Freshman* studies have asked a variety of these questions of incoming freshmen for the past 34 years.<sup>7</sup> The picture that emerges is that the values of alumni of the **We the People** program are more conducive to participatory citizenship in a democratic society.

As reported earlier, 83% of alumni feel it is essential or very important to keep current with political affairs. Only 34% of incoming freshmen felt this way.

Substantiating their earlier reports of political participation, 65% of alumni held it essential or very important to influence the political structure. This is more than three times the number of college freshmen who held this to be essential or very important.

Alumni are also less materialistic than incoming freshmen. When asked how important it was to be very well off financially, 48% of alumni in contrast to 74% of college freshmen consider this to be essential or very important. Nearly all, 90% of alumni versus 42% of freshmen, consider it important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life.

Fifty-eight percent of alumni value the aspiration of becoming leaders in their communities. "The **We the People** program helped me to realize that I was very passionate about politics and wanted to pursue it in the future," wrote one. In addition, 15% of alumni agreed that running for office was essential or very important. "Participating in **We the People** helped instill a sense of ownership in me regarding politics and government. It turned my fledgling inclination toward influencing politics and government into a lifelong passion, an integral goal, and an intellectual imperative," stated another.

Altruistic behavior is also held in higher esteem by alumni than college freshmen. When asked about the importance of helping others who are in difficulty, 86% of alumni held it to be essential or very important, versus 62% of freshmen. Many alumni are serving our nation. One is volunteering in the Peace Corps in Burkina Faso, another is a police officer and a paramedic, and yet another alum serves in the FBI. Many are teachers and college students. Alumni also volunteer to assist students in **We the People** classes. "I've been volunteering to assist my alma mater's **We the People** class. The tutoring process has been fulfilling and enjoyable," said a past participant.

## Conclusion

*The knowledge that I gained in the **We the People** program has helped me in college as well as in the Marines. It has helped me to explain our system to many other people, and it has helped me to better understand every aspect of politics. – Alum*

In conclusion, **We the People** program alumni are better prepared for the privileges and responsibilities of democratic citizenship than their peers. First, they are interested in politics and public affairs. Second, they are better informed. They watch news broadcasts and read the paper more often than their nonparticipating peers. Alumni discuss national politics more often than their peers.

Alumni participate in the political process at higher rates than their peers. They also participate in a broader range of political activities. Higher rates of political participation include: voting, working for political candidates, contacting national and local officials, demonstrating to protest policies to which they object, and discussing politics with others. Evidence of commitment to participatory citizenship is reflected in alumni values and life objectives. In contrast to college freshmen, alumni place a higher value on social activism, ranging from influencing the political structure to becoming community leaders.

Ninety-two percent of alumni reported that they voted in November 2004. This is 14% higher than voting numbers among respondents surveyed in the 2004 National Election Study. The data suggest that civic education programs may be able to increase informed political participation. As one alum stated, "**We the People** helped to show me that individuals can make a difference; it taught me that our form of government is a luxury not many other people are afforded. It is our duty and responsibility as citizens to be involved in the process."

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The program was inaugurated in 1987 and is funded by the U.S. Department of Education under the Education for Democracy Act approved by the U.S. Congress.
- <sup>2</sup> Survey available upon request. Please contact the Research and Evaluation Department at [Nairne@civiced.org](mailto:Nairne@civiced.org).
- <sup>3</sup> Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). *Voice and Equality, Civic Volunteerism in American Politics*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Voter turnout is a ratio of the actual number who voted over the eligible population. Some respondents may say they voted when they did not, which results in overestimation of turnout (Holbrook and Krosnick 2005). For instance, in the 2004 National Election Studies, among respondents aged 18–34, 78% of respondents said that they voted in the standard version of the question, while 64% reported voting in the experimental version, which offered alternatives (i.e., “I thought about voting this time, but didn’t,” or “I usually vote, but didn’t this time.”). Our respondents were asked the standard version, so we will use the 78% as our comparison figure.
- <sup>5</sup> CIRCLE Fact Sheet, November 8, 2004, updated January 5, 2005, p. 1.
- <sup>6</sup> *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2004* (2004), Sax, Hurtado, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney, Los Angeles: Higher Education Institute, UCLA.
- <sup>7</sup> *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2004* (2004), Sax, Hurtado, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney, Los Angeles: Higher Education Institute, UCLA. Respondents compared with alumni are full-time first year students entering four-year colleges.

For more information on Center research, contact

Suzanne Soule  
Director of Research and Evaluation

[soule@civiced.org](mailto:soule@civiced.org)  
800-350-4223  
fax 818-591-9330