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A Lack of Civic Commitment?

BY PABLO EISENBERG

A recent study on youth leadership and community service, conducted by Peter D. Hart Associates for Public Allies (a Washington, D.C., nonprofit that promotes youth leadership), found that today's young Americans are committed to community service and direct, personal assistance to others. But the survey of 728 people between the ages of 18 and 30 also raised disturbing questions about the young generation's commitment to civic engagement and social change.

The focus of these young Americans seems primarily personal, revolving around the satisfaction they draw from direct services and personal relationships. Their vision doesn't appear to encompass the broader community or the commonweal. They manifest little concern for collective action to change public policies or abusive institutions. Only 18 percent said they had volunteered for social or political causes.

When young people cited the need to work together (27 percent did so), they indicated that such activities should be in small groups at the local level. Reared in cynical times, they expressed little or no confidence in governments, political leaders or traditional non-profit institutions. They seem unconcerned about the interconnection between local, state and national policies and public administration. They fail to grasp (or are uninterested in) the notion that in a representative democracy citizens have to engage in the process of reforming the system and strengthening its leadership. They display the attitude of bystanders, not active citizens.

This lack of interest in civic engagement is perhaps the most troubling finding of the study. There is no vision among the youth about what this country should be or what direction it should take. There is little sense of what policies or mechanisms will be needed (other than vaguely defined local groups) to create a better society. Only 52 percent viewed voting in elections as important. Apolitical in nature, the group seemingly has adopted a personal rather than civic agenda.

Much of this personal agenda, the study found, is based (commendably) on the young adults' strong sense of values,

principles and standards. They expressed a deep respect for individual differences and working with people from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In contrast to their parents' generation, they see racial and ethnic diversity as the norm.

They also reject the traditional leadership model: top-down, autocratic and non-collegial. They consider seeing differing points of view, sharing leadership roles, getting along with others and bringing diverse people together as the most admirable leadership qualities. But they did not mention courage, decisiveness and making tough decisions, which are often at the heart of timely and effective decision-making. They seem oblivious that popular and consensual decisions frequently lead to poor choices and paralysis.

The good news is the heavy involvement of young Americans in community service and volunteering. Nearly 70 percent said they had been involved in community activities during the past three years. Fifty-four percent said they had done so at least once a month.

The study leaves us ambivalent about the capacity and willingness of young Americans to provide the leadership our country needs to become a more vital and equitable society. Do they have the desire and toughness to get us from here to there? Will they be willing to complement their voluntary service with collective action to bring about social change? Will they help to strengthen and reform government at all levels? Will they muster the zeal to become effective citizens in the political process? Will they participate in efforts to identify and support new political leadership? Will they be willing to enter the political arena?

If the answer to these questions is "yes," we can have some assurances that many of the changes this nation requires will be implemented. If the answer is "no," we may find that we have produced a generation more rooted in self than community, more concerned about personal feelings than the common good; a generation ironically ill-prepared to provide the leadership to put into practice its values and idealism.

Pablo Eisenberg retired last year as president of the Center for Community Change, based in Washington, D.C., and will be a senior fellow at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute.