

Local daily newspapers, civic activities and trust in government

For more information:

Limor Peer, l-peer@northwestern.edu, 847-467-6578
Mary Nesbitt, m-nesbitt@northwestern.edu, 847-467-4285

Executive summary

The Readership Institute has conducted studies of [100 newspaper markets](#) in the United States to measure Reader Behavior Scores (RBS) since 2000.

In 2006, we examined the relationship between readership, civic activities, and trust in government. We asked respondents about their participation in civic activities and its importance to them, their trust in government and their trust in the newspaper, and the relationship of these to readership.

As part of the 2006 study, we also have reports about [readership and people's "experiences"](#) with their local daily newspaper (or how engaged and involved they are with it), and about [people's use of newspaper Web sites](#).

Highlights

- Readership is linked to civic behavior. Heavier readers are more engaged in civic life, have more trust in their local newspaper, and in elected officials (though not in the institution of government).
- People generally rate civic activities as fairly important, but only a minority reports engaging in various civic activities, with the exception of voting.
- Younger people tend to put more importance on activities like volunteering and donating money to worthy causes, while older people rate activities like elections and keeping up with local and national issues as more important.
- People who say civic activities are important, and who have participated in various civic activities, have higher RBS. This holds true for all age groups.
- Trust in newspapers is relatively high – about 75% say they trust their local daily newspaper most of the time or just about always – and is positively correlated with RBS. Trust in elected officials is positively correlated with RBS, but trust in government is not.

Note: A list of the [Impact newspapers](#) and the [questionnaire](#) for this study are located on our Web site at www.readership.org.

Civic involvement

Three questions in the Readership Institute's 2006 study gauge people's level of civic involvement and its perceived importance. Other research has shown that civic involvement often relates to newspaper use. Here we asked how important certain civic activities were, whether respondents participated in a number of civic activities, and whether they voted in recent elections and plan to vote in upcoming elections.

We asked respondents to rate the importance of five civic activities and, on average, all were rated as fairly important (between 3.18 and 3.68 on a 5 point scale).

Women generally rate these activities higher than men, except for keeping up with state and national issues.

Generally, older people rate some civic activities higher than younger people (i.e., elections, keeping up with local and with national issues), and others lower (e.g., doing volunteer work and donating money).

Higher income and education correlated with higher importance ratings.

Race and ethnicity are not a factor in importance ratings.

How important is it for you, personally, to participate in the following activities?

	n	Elections	Keeping up with local / community events	Keeping up with state and national issues	Doing volunteer work or community service	Donating money to worthy causes
		Scale 1-5	Scale 1-5	Scale 1-5	Scale 1-5	Scale 1-5
Overall	3,097	3.68	3.28	3.57	3.18	3.28
Female	1,572	3.74	3.38	3.54	3.29	3.33
Male	1,482	3.62	3.19	3.61	3.06	3.23
18 to 24	214	3.41	3.12	3.46	3.25	3.34
25 to 34	489	3.51	3.26	3.49	3.22	3.39
35 to 44	806	3.66	3.26	3.55	3.28	3.26
45 to 54	507	3.71	3.33	3.62	3.15	3.28
55 to 64	446	3.81	3.35	3.64	3.15	3.27
65 or older	574	3.80	3.28	3.62	2.99	3.21
BELOW \$25,000	476	3.30	3.11	3.26	3.01	3.02
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	714	3.63	3.28	3.55	3.14	3.24
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	671	3.72	3.28	3.60	3.18	3.30
\$75,000 OR MORE	843	3.88	3.42	3.75	3.30	3.48
Less than H.S. grad	156	2.97	3.11	2.97	2.79	2.90
Graduated H.S./G.E.D	685	3.42	3.13	3.33	2.90	3.17
Some college	948	3.71	3.27	3.56	3.24	3.23
College degree	716	3.82	3.33	3.71	3.25	3.40
Post-grad	519	3.96	3.49	3.91	3.43	3.47
White/Caucasian	2,380	3.69	3.26	3.57	3.15	3.28
African American	296	3.78	3.51	3.56	3.27	3.26
Hispanic	123	3.55	3.50	3.52	3.28	3.36
Asian	55	3.22	3.07	3.45	2.97	3.02
Another group	103	3.63	3.20	3.70	3.29	3.47
Mixed, Multi-racial	40	3.19	3.27	3.47	3.67	3.22

While people rate these activities as fairly important, a small proportion of the sample (between 5.4% and 38.3%) reports actually engaging in civic activities as measured in this study, with the exception of voting (about 80% report voting in the 2004 presidential elections, and over 80% said they planned to vote in the 2006 and 2008 elections).

Survey research literature establishes that people tend to over-report voting, and so the high numbers in this study come as no surprise. Researchers often attribute vote over-reporting to respondents' desire to offer a socially desirable response. The literature is less clear about the extent and nature of over-reporting of other civic activities. In any case, if over-reporting is occurring we can assume that even fewer people participate in civic activities, reinforcing our point that there is a gap between how important people think civic activities are and how much they actually do it.

In the last 12 months, have you...

	n	Contacted an elected political official	Attended a political meeting or rally	Participated in a protest, march or demonstration	Signed a petition, in paper or on the Internet	Volunteered in an organization affiliated with religion	Participated in organized project to solve a community problem	Given money to any organization totaling more than \$500
		% YES	% YES	% YES	% YES	% YES	% YES	% YES
Overall	3,097	27.9	17.6	5.4	35.3	38.3	28.5	30.9
Female	1,572	24.4	15.6	3.4	35.7	39.5	27.1	26.9
Male	1,482	31.6	19.6	7.4	34.9	37.0	30.0	35.1
18 to 24	214	14.0	17.7	14.0	31.2	34.0	26.4	22.8
25 to 34	489	20.0	17.9	5.9	33.7	41.8	26.9	27.8
35 to 44	806	29.1	16.3	4.6	42.8	37.9	29.0	34.0
45 to 54	507	32.7	19.5	5.9	37.5	37.8	32.4	34.5
55 to 64	446	36.0	21.9	5.4	36.2	38.0	33.3	33.1
65 or older	574	27.5	14.6	2.4	26.1	37.0	22.9	27.4
BELOW \$25,000	476	15.1	9.8	4.8	21.7	23.8	12.7	11.1
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	714	22.5	16.2	4.7	33.7	37.0	23.1	17.5
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	671	28.1	18.1	5.4	36.9	44.8	35.4	34.7
\$75,000 OR MORE	843	38.5	23.3	6.9	45.8	41.9	37.8	52.1
Less than H.S. grad	156	5.8	5.1	4.4	17.7	26.3	10.9	11.5
Graduated H.S./G.E.D	685	16.0	8.2	2.7	22.4	29.1	13.9	17.2
Some college	948	26.8	16.8	5.2	35.5	38.3	27.2	25.8
College degree	716	35.1	22.5	7.0	44.8	44.0	35.8	42.9
Post-grad	519	43.6	30.0	7.9	46.2	46.9	46.4	48.9
White/Caucasian	2,380	29.9	17.0	4.7	37.5	38.8	28.7	32.6
African American	296	17.9	21.1	9.0	28.1	40.3	26.8	20.8
Hispanic	123	15.2	16.1	7.2	28.8	31.2	25.6	25.6
Asian	55	27.3	12.7	7.1	23.6	27.3	23.2	27.3
Another group	103	28.2	33.0	9.9	39.8	38.6	32.7	34.0
Mixed, Multi-racial	40	27.5	12.2	2.5	19.5	46.3	42.5	30.0

Did you, or do you plan to, vote in...

	n	The November 2004 (Bush/Kerry) presidential elections	The 2006 congressional elections	The 2008 presidential elections
		% YES	% YES	% YES
Overall	3,097	79.5	82.4	88.3
Female	1,572	81.1	83.6	89.6
Male	1,482	78.8	81.1	86.8
18 to 24	214	45.8	69.3	79.6
25 to 34	489	71.4	71.6	85.9
35 to 44	806	78.3	82.3	87.5
45 to 54	507	83.1	84.2	88.1
55 to 64	446	87.1	89.5	91.3
65 or older	574	91.3	89.2	92.4
BELOW \$25,000	476	69.3	66.6	93.8
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	714	71.6	81.2	93.8
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	671	82.3	87.8	93.8
\$75,000 OR MORE	843	84.2	87.2	93.8
Less than H.S. grad	156	67.1	63.9	67.1
Graduated H.S./G.E.D	685	80.7	74.7	80.7
Some college	948	88.7	82.3	88.7
College degree	716	95.6	87.7	95.6
Post-grad	519	93.7	90.6	93.7
White/Caucasian	2,380	67.1	83.6	89.0
African American	296	80.7	80.9	90.0
Hispanic	123	88.7	76.6	79.7
Asian	55	95.6	70.4	70.4
Another group	103	93.7	78.2	81.0
Mixed, Multi-racial	40	67.1	75.0	85.0

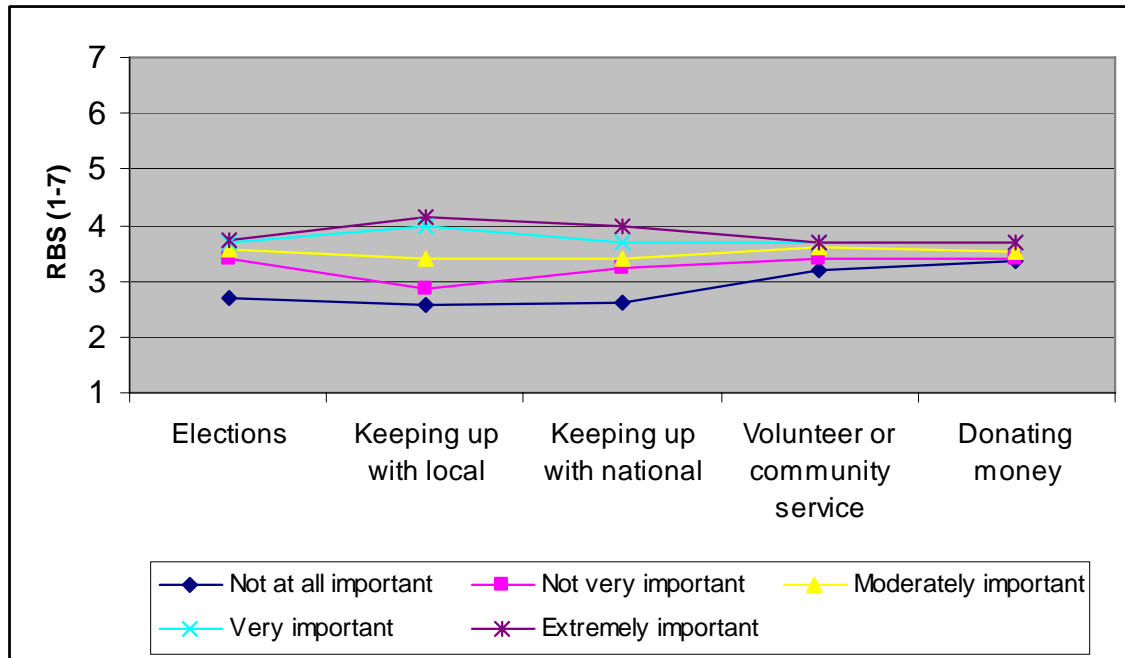
Next, we tested whether civic involvement is correlated with readership. We found that it is – both in terms of the importance attached to it and actual behavior.

People who say civic activities are important have higher RBS:

RBS and importance of civic activities

	Not at all important	Not very important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
	RBS (1-7)	RBS (1-7)	RBS (1-7)	RBS (1-7)	RBS (1-7)
Elections	2.70	3.42	3.55	3.67	3.73
Keeping up with local/ community events	2.58	2.87	3.42	3.98	4.13
Keeping up with state and national issues	2.60	3.22	3.38	3.70	3.97
Doing volunteer work or community service	3.20	3.39	3.59	3.69	3.68
Donating money to worthy causes	3.37	3.42	3.51	3.67	3.67

For each civic activity, the more important it is, the higher the RBS:



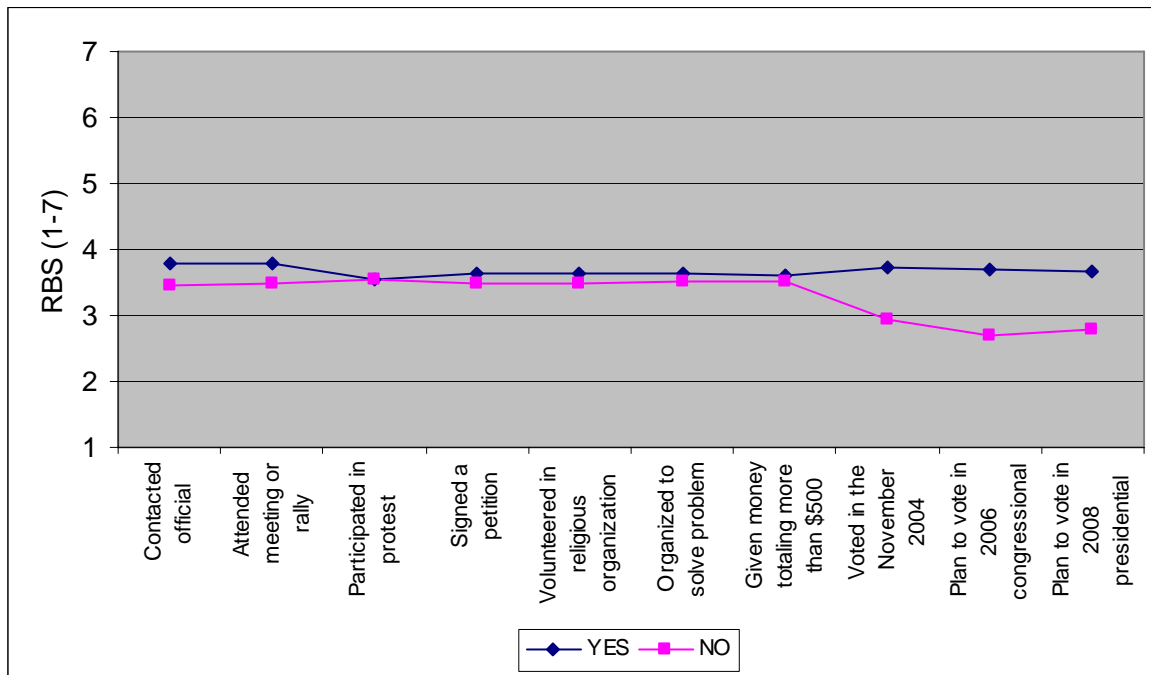
This holds true regardless of age. The correlation between RBS and civic participation is found in every age group.

As well, people who say they participated in various civic activities have higher RBS:

RBS and participation in civic activities

	RBS (1-7)	
	YES	NO
Contacted an elected political official	3.80	3.45
Attended a political meeting or rally	3.80	3.50
Participated in a protest, march or demonstration	3.54	3.55
Signed a petition, in paper or on the Internet	3.65	3.50
Volunteered in an organization affiliated with religion	3.65	3.50
Participated in an organized project to try to solve a community problem	3.65	3.51
Given money to any organization or causes altogether totaling more than \$500	3.62	3.52
Voted in the November 2004 (Bush/Kerry) presidential elections	3.73	2.93
Plan to vote in the 2006 congressional elections	3.71	2.71
Plan to vote in the 2008 presidential elections	3.66	2.79

For each civic activity, those who said they did it have a higher RBS than those who said they did not:



This holds true regardless of age. The correlation between RBS and civic participation is found in every age group.

In sum, our study confirms a relationship between readership and civic involvement. Differences in RBS are greatest between those who vote and those who don't, suggesting that this manifestation of civic involvement is particularly sensitive to newspaper use. The study does not test for causality (i.e., whether readership leads to more civic involvement).

Trust in the newspaper and in government

We also asked three questions about trust. Other research has shown that civic involvement often relates to trust in institutions. We asked about trust in the newspaper, trust in the Federal government, and trust in elected officials.

Levels of trust in the local daily newspaper are relatively high (about 75% say they trust their local daily newspaper most of the time or just about always). About half the people say the newspaper can be trusted to do a good job most of the time, with the remainder split among those who think the newspaper can be trusted to do a good job only some of the time and those who think it can be trusted just about always.

In terms of demographics, younger people, and those with lower education and income levels tend to have slightly higher levels of trust in the newspaper. Gender does not play a significant role. Race/ethnicity data should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

How much of the time do you think you can trust (your local) newspaper to do a good job?

	n	Only some of the time	Most of the time	Just about always	Average
		%	%	%	Scale 1-3
Overall	3,097	24.67	48.08	27.24	2.03
Female	1,572	21.09	50.83	28.08	2.07
Male	1,482	28.60	45.07	26.33	1.98
18 to 24	214	20.32	45.99	33.69	2.13
25 to 34	489	18.27	47.31	34.43	2.16
35 to 44	806	23.37	48.41	28.22	2.05
45 to 54	507	28.79	47.03	24.18	1.96
55 to 64	446	28.81	46.97	24.21	1.95
65 or older	574	25.52	51.23	23.25	1.98
BELOW \$25,000	476	21.15	44.37	34.48	2.13
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	714	18.55	48.27	33.18	2.15
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	671	26.38	49.51	24.10	1.98
\$75,000 OR MORE	843	28.21	48.80	22.99	1.95
Less than H.S. grad	156	16.78	44.76	38.46	2.22
Graduated H.S./G.E.D	685	19.24	44.20	36.57	2.17
Some college	948	24.31	49.77	25.92	2.02
College degree	716	28.41	49.68	21.90	1.94
Post-grad	519	29.54	49.23	21.23	1.92
White/Caucasian	2,380	24.70	48.80	26.50	2.02
African American	296	18.73	45.69	35.58	2.17
Hispanic	123	28.07	37.72	34.21	2.06
Asian	55	12.82	56.41	30.77	2.16
Another group	103	34.48	41.38	24.14	1.90
Mixed, Multi-racial	40	22.86	57.14	20.00	1.96

Trust in the newspaper is positively correlated with RBS. In general, the greater the trust in the newspaper, the greater the RBS:

Trust in the newspaper by RBS

	n	Trust the newspaper to do a good job only some of the time	Trust the newspaper to do a good job most of the time	Trust the newspaper to do a good job just about always
		RBS 1-7	RBS 1-7	RBS 1-7
Overall	3,097	3.40	3.94	4.02
Female	1,572	3.40	4.00	4.15
Male	1,482	3.40	3.86	3.86
18 to 24	214	2.49	3.12	3.48
25 to 34	489	2.76	3.05	3.45
35 to 44	806	2.96	3.34	3.79
45 to 54	507	3.36	4.34	4.16
55 to 64	446	3.66	4.53	4.56
65 or older	574	4.28	4.92	4.78
BELOW \$25,000	476	2.87	3.62	4.04
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	714	3.17	4.07	3.67
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	671	3.52	3.90	4.28
\$75,000 OR MORE	843	3.48	3.82	4.14
Less than H.S. grad	156	3.61	4.08	4.26
Graduated H.S./G.E.D	685	3.36	4.10	3.90
Some college	948	3.27	3.92	3.87
College degree	716	3.35	3.65	4.21
Post-grad	519	3.53	4.16	4.20
White/Caucasian	2,380	3.46	4.02	4.05
African American	296	3.72	3.91	4.04
Hispanic	123	2.85	3.26	4.00
Asian	55	2.81	2.74	3.30
Another group	103	2.87	3.52	3.63
Mixed, Multi-racial	40	2.53	3.58	3.99

In contrast with trust in the local daily newspaper, trust in the Federal government in Washington is low. On average, 70% of the respondents say they think the government in Washington can be trusted to do a good job only some of the time.

Younger people have slightly higher levels of trust in the Federal government in Washington than do older people. Other demographic factors have no impact, and race/ethnicity results should be interpreted with caution due to the small size of some of the groups.

How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do a good job?

	n	Only some of the time	Most of the time	Just about always	Average
		%	%	%	Scale 1-3
Overall	3,097	69.9	25.0	5.0	1.35
Female	1,572	69.20	25.10	5.70	1.37
Male	1,482	70.73	24.95	4.31	1.34
18 to 24	214	63.81	26.73	9.46	1.46
25 to 34	489	59.41	32.30	8.29	1.49
35 to 44	806	68.33	27.58	4.09	1.36
45 to 54	507	72.41	23.18	4.41	1.32
55 to 64	446	77.92	19.62	2.46	1.25
65 or older	574	75.30	20.10	4.60	1.29
BELOW \$25,000	476	69.53	23.98	6.48	1.37
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	714	69.57	24.34	6.08	1.37
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	671	69.60	25.16	5.25	1.36
\$75,000 OR MORE	843	69.64	27.25	3.11	1.33
Less than H.S. grad	156	73.50	19.52	6.97	1.33
Graduated H.S./G.E.D	685	73.44	20.89	5.67	1.32
Some college	948	67.30	27.46	5.24	1.38
College degree	716	67.39	27.58	5.03	1.38
Post-grad	519	73.04	24.09	2.87	1.30
White/Caucasian	2,380	69.12	25.85	5.03	1.36
African American	296	78.19	16.74	5.06	1.27
Hispanic	123	68.15	25.96	5.90	1.38
Asian	55	45.29	46.50	8.21	1.63
Another group	103	71.73	22.40	5.87	1.34
Mixed, Multi-racial	40	89.62	10.38	0.00	1.10

In addition to a low level of trust in the government as an institution, respondents also have only moderate levels of trust in most elected officials. On a scale of 1-4 (1 = completely disagree and 4 = completely agree), the average rating is 2.37.

Older people and people with higher income and education are more likely to say that elected officials are trustworthy. Gender does not affect these ratings. Race/ethnicity results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample sizes.

Agree elected officials are trustworthy

		Completely disagree	Mostly disagree	Mostly agree	Completely agree	Average
	n	%	%	%	%	Scale 1-4
Overall	3,097	13.3	38.6	46.3	1.9	2.37
Female	1,572	12.21	40.30	46.26	1.23	2.37
Male	1,482	14.40	36.74	46.29	2.57	2.37
18 to 24	214	26.08	31.38	39.68	2.87	2.19
25 to 34	489	9.06	41.31	48.30	1.33	2.42
35 to 44	806	13.13	40.46	44.56	1.84	2.35
45 to 54	507	13.12	39.61	45.11	2.16	2.36
55 to 64	446	12.30	37.56	48.14	2.00	2.40
65 or older	574	13.66	35.70	49.20	1.44	2.38
BELOW \$25,000	476	18.28	40.07	39.40	2.26	2.26
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	714	13.00	42.26	43.04	1.70	2.33
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	671	14.30	36.57	46.54	2.59	2.37
\$75,000 OR MORE	843	9.06	38.10	51.60	1.24	2.45
Less than H.S. grad	156	32.86	35.33	30.85	0.97	2.00
Graduated H.S./G.E.D	685	14.24	38.91	44.33	2.52	2.35
Some college	948	13.67	38.79	46.15	1.40	2.35
College degree	716	11.78	38.88	47.05	2.29	2.40
Post-grad	519	7.76	37.88	53.12	1.25	2.48
White/Caucasian	2,380	12.15	37.54	48.28	2.02	2.40
African American	296	23.33	44.12	31.15	1.41	2.11
Hispanic	123	9.75	44.36	44.35	1.54	2.38
Asian	55	9.82	31.11	54.80	4.28	2.54
Another group	103	16.95	41.32	41.73	0.00	2.25
Mixed, Multi-racial	40	15.93	54.69	29.39	0.00	2.13

Trust in government does not relate to RBS, that is, readership behavior is not statistically different among those who trust in government some of the time, most of the time or just about all the time.

Trust in the Federal government, by RBS

Trust the government to do a good job	n	Only some of the time	Most of the time	Just about always
		RBS 1-7	RBS 1-7	RBS 1-7
Overall	3,097	3.57	3.51	3.76

Trust in elected officials, however, generally does relate to RBS (the most notable difference is between those who generally agree and those who do not):

Trust in elected officials, by RBS

Most elected officials are trustworthy	n	Completely disagree	Mostly disagree	Mostly agree	Completely agree
		RBS 1-7	RBS 1-7	RBS 1-7	RBS 1-7
Overall	3,097	3.44	3.40	3.72	3.68

In sum, this study shows that readership is linked to civic behavior: those who are heavier readers are more engaged in civic life, have more trust in their local newspaper, and in elected officials (though not in the institution of government).