Arts + Social Impact
Explorer Fact Sheet

ARTS + POLITICAL ACTIVATION

OVERVIEW

Protestors and political activists come to their rallies and marches armed with banners and signs, often displaying creative slogans to give visuals to their cause. When political activism intersects with the arts, it finds expression for the passions of those seeking justice and social change.

We’ve seen such cohesion between the arts and social justice in people who have risen to fight for the rights of immigrants, responsible gun legislation, LGBT rights, civil rights, and more. There has never been a political movement that did not converge around a core set of imagery meant to articulate core values, nor a political movement that has succeeded that did not use the vehicles of arts and culture to amplify and clarify the goals and messages of the movement.

Art-goers in general are far more likely to vote, and those who work in the arts even more so. In addition, people who engaged in participatory arts felt differently about their rights afterward, with more wanting to continue to engage in local community projects. Furthermore, research shows that the right imagery can transform a person’s stance more quickly and more completely than text alone.

IMPACT POINTS

20% MORE LIKELY TO VOTE

Art-goers are far more likely to vote. American adults who attend art museums or live arts performances are 20 percent more likely to vote than non-attendees.1

97% OF ARTS ADMINISTRATORS VOTE

People who lead arts agencies locally are 2x as likely to have voted in a federal election, and 4x as likely to have voted in a local or state election, as the general population.2

THE ARTS MAKE PEOPLE MORE AWARE OF THEIR RIGHTS

A study in the United Kingdom found that 20 percent of people who engaged in participatory arts felt differently about their rights after participating.3

YOUNG ARTS PARTICIPANTS ARE 2X AS LIKELY TO PLAN TO REGISTER TO VOTE

Young people engaged in participatory arts are highly motivated to vote. A study of young artists found that 84 percent of participants were likely or very likely to vote when eligible/in the next election, compared to just 44 percent of 18-24-year-old who voted in the previous election.4

INTEGRATING THE ARTS CAN INSPIRE 1,000s TO ACTION

The use of the arts to illustrate complicated issues related to the environment can inspire thousands of people to take action who would not otherwise.5

THE ARTS INCREASE A PERSON’S DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE IN IMPROVING THEIR COMMUNITY

Following engagement in the arts, 63 percent of participants indicated that they had become more aware of—and more interested in remediying—local challenges.6
EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE

The AIDS Memorial Quilt, Atlanta, GA

The Quilt was conceived of by Cleve Jones after attending a march following the assassinations of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone. Placards bearing the names of AIDS victims were taped to the San Francisco Federal Building and resembled a quilt.

http://www.aidsquilt.org
junie_rhoads@aidsquilt.org

For Freedoms, Brooklyn, NY

ForFreedoms is an artist-driven super PAC, which combines political and cultural production to inspire deeper civic engagement from the public. It creates advertising campaigns that have appeared on billboards, bus stops, park benches, lawn signs, and art galleries across the United States.

https://www.facebook.com/forfreedoms/
info@forfreedoms.org

Penumbra Theatre Summer Institute, St. Paul, MN

This three-year leadership development project trains teens to use their passion for the arts to promote social justice and equity. The students in turn enrich their communities by standing up, speaking out, and moving those who listen with the power of performance.

https://penumbratheatre.org/
info@penumbratheatre.org
image: August Wilson's Jitney, performed by Penumbra Theatre. Photo by Allen Weeks

Artist Campaign School

Artist Campaign School recruits, trains, and mentors artists and those in the cultural community to run for and hold elected office.

https://artistcampaignschool.org/
info@artistcampaignschool.org
image: “This is What Democracy Looks Like.” Image via Artists Campaign School

Theatre of the Oppressed NYC (TONY), New York, NY

TONY partners with communities facing discrimination to inspire transformative action through theater. It organizes theater troupes in collaboration with local communities—homeless adults and youth, people living with HIV/AIDS, immigrants, veterans, etc. It also hosts an annual legislative theater festival, which advocates for specific legislative outcomes.

http://www.tonyc.nyc
info@tonyc.nyc
image: Legislative Theatre 2017: Day 2 (Concrete Justice Troupe), University Settlement, NYC, 2017. Photo by Will O’Hare. Courtesy of Theatre of the Oppressed NYC

REFERENCES


**Art-Goers in Their Communities: Patterns of Civic and Social Engagement**

This research report by the National Endowment for the Arts investigates how arts participants and artists are engaged in volunteerism, community events, and voting. [https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/100862](https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/100862)

**The Arts and Civic Engagement: Involved in Arts, Involved in Life**

The study that looks at the ways in which readers and arts participants are engaged in the life of their communities. [https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/85500](https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/85500)

**“Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics”: Cultural Resistance, Culture Jamming, and Anti-Consumption Activism as Critical Public Pedagogy**

This research paper explores the power of “culture jamming,” using creative interventions to draw attention to large-scale social issues. [https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/100863](https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/100863)

**Participatory Arts and Political Engagement**

The study looks at how community-based arts projects impact the political behavior of youth. More specifically, it examines if and how participatory arts enable reconnection with political engagement and personal reconnection in terms of knowledge. [https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/100861](https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/100861)

**Arts, Political Activation, & Immigration**

This essay from the book *Arts & America: Arts, Culture, and the Future of American Communities*, looks at changes in the meaning of citizenship and political activation of individuals, particularly through the lens of immigration issues, and the role that the arts may play in positively impacting those changes over the next 10–15 years. [https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/90687](https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/90687)
ORGANIZATIONS

The Center for Artistic Activism (C4AA)
CFAA is a place to explore, analyze, and strengthen connections between social activism and artistic practice. It trains people to apply artistic principles to social justice organizing techniques.
http://www.artisticactivism.org

Vera List Center for Arts and Politics
Established at the New School, the Vera List Center is a research center and public forum for art, culture, and politics. It fosters a diverse community of artists, scholars, and policymakers who work to bring about positive change.
http://www.veralistcenter.org

US Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC)
USDAC is a grassroots network of citizen-artists committed to “inciting creativity and social imagination to shape a culture of empathy, equity, and belonging.”
https://www.usdac.us

Animating Democracy
A program of Americans for the Arts which conducts research and field exchange around the role of arts and creativity in issues of civic engagement, social justice, and activism.
http://www.animatingdemocracy.org

Rafael Cintron Ortiz Latino Cultural Center, University of Illinois, Chicago
The Latino Cultural Center was founded in 1976 and works to help communities deepen their understanding of Latino cultures, increase civic engagement, and harness community knowledge and assets to build coalitions for positive social change.
https://latinocultural.uic.edu/about/

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LEARN MORE
AMERICANSFORTHEARTS.ORG/SOCIALIMPACT
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