

# THE PUBLIC MATTERS

## How Americans View Education, Health & Psychology

---

TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

### **Edu-Activism in the United States: Civic Participation on Educational Issues**

Oren Pizmony-Levy

Aaron Pallas

Nancy Green Saraisky

August 2018

Recommended citation:

Pizmony-Levy, O., Pallas, A. and Green Saraisky, N. (2018). Edu-Activism in the United States: Civic Participation on Educational Issues. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Electronic version of this and other reports from The Public Matters project are available at:

<https://www.tc.columbia.edu/thepublicmatters/>

<http://academiccommons.columbia.edu>

Follow The Public Matters project on Twitter: @TCPublicMatters

*Note: The Public Matters was formerly named The Public Mind.*

# Edu-Activism in the United States: Civic Participation on Educational Issues

## 1. Why study education activism?

Recently, there has been a resurgence of education activism in the United States. Media headlines suggest that citizens are raising their voices loudly and publicly to challenge various aspects of the education system. During the past few years alone, there have been headlines about the Opt Out movement, where parents refuse to have their children sit for federally-mandated assessments; the massive opposition to the nomination of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, with the volume of calls to Congress running so high that the US Capitol switchboard jammed; waves of teacher strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona; and teachers mobilizing against proposals to turn the education system into a charter system in Puerto Rico. And citizens continue to work to change their local systems, whether by mobilizing to introduce creationism as an additional narrative in science education, or ensuring that marginalized voices are included in various curricula.<sup>1,2</sup>

The scholarly approach to understanding much of this activism has used the lens of social movements to explain how and why citizens challenge the status quo<sup>3</sup>. Social movements are informal or formal networks of people working in concert to change society. However past research on social movements in education has focused on specific cases, and thus we do not have a holistic picture that goes beyond these cases. At the same time, there has been a separate line of education research that has looked at the growing role of the private sector in education, sometimes called “edu-business.”<sup>4</sup> As we thought about instances of protest in education, as well as the role of edu-business, we wondered how the general public thinks about civic participation on educational issues, and how active individuals are in voicing their concerns. To address this question, we followed past research on civic engagement in the United States, and conducted a public opinion survey where respondents were asked about different forms of political and social action that they might take regarding education and schools.

There are different ways to define and to measure education activism. For the purpose of this report, we define **education activism** as behaviors that are intended to create change in the educational sphere; it includes both individual and collective behaviors that often seek to challenge or defend extant school and/or educational authorities. This definition is designed to

---

<sup>1</sup> For research on Afrocentrism and creationism, see Binder, A. J. (2009). *Contentious curricula: Afrocentrism and creationism in American public schools*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/08/13/541814668/ethnic-studies-a-movement-born-of-a-ban>

<sup>3</sup> For example, Pizmony-Levy, O. and Green Saraisky, N. (2016). *Who opts out and why? Results from a national survey on opting out of standardized tests*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

<sup>4</sup> Verger, A., Lubienski, C., & Steiner-Khamsi, G. (Eds.). (2016). *World yearbook of education 2016: The global education industry*. Routledge.

encompass a broad range of behaviors, both within and outside institutional channels. Thus education activism could include formal political behaviors (or conventional participation) such as voting for candidates based on their education platforms, running for office with a clear education platform, or contacting a politician. It might also include more traditional protest behaviors (or social movement activities) such as signing a petition, joining a group, donating money or raising funds, and taking part in a protest or a demonstration. Education activism could also include less typically politicized activities such as volunteering at a local school, even if the activist does not have child enrolled there.

## **2. Participation in education activism**

One-third of respondents (32%) say they have engaged in at least one type of education activism in the past year. About one-fifth (18%) say they have engaged in only one type of activism, and 14% say they have engaged with two or more types of activism (Figure 2.1). Findings from the 2016 wave of the American National Election Studies (ANES) echo this pattern. In the post-election survey, about one-third of respondents (29%) indicated they have “attended a meeting on a school/community issue in the past 12 months.”

Participation in education activism varies across different types of behaviors (Figure 2.2). Less-demanding and low-risk behaviors are more common than others. Close to two-fifths (39%) of respondents indicated they have donated money or raised funds for an educational group/educational issue (17% in the past year and 22% in the more distant past). Slightly more than one-third of respondents (36%) say they have signed a petition about an educational issue (14% in the past year). Less than one-third of respondents (29%) say they have participated in a group whose main focus is education (11% in the past year). About one-fifth (19%) say they have contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician to express their views on an educational issue (8% in the past year). Only one in ten respondents (10%) indicates that they have ever taken part in a protest or a demonstration about an educational issue, and just 4% report doing so in the past year.

The survey also points to the potential for education activism. A sizeable share of respondents (between 41% and 48%) indicates that they have not yet participated, but might do so in the future. For example, two-fifths of respondents say they might donate money (41%) and/or take part in a protest/demonstration (42%). About half of respondents say they might sign a petition and/or participate in a group (48% each).

Education activism varies across social groups defined by gender, race/ethnicity, age, parental status, community type, education attainment, and political ideology. Figure 2.3 presents socio-demographic differences with respect to participation in at least one type of political activism related to education in the past year.

1. **Women are more likely than men to participate in education activism.** Approximately two-fifths of women (39%) and one-quarter of men (25%) participated in at least one type of education activism in the past year.

<i>% doing in the past year</i>	Women	Men
At least one action	39%	25%
Donated money or raised funds	21%	13%
Signed a petition	16%	11%
Participated in a group	14%	8%
Contacted a politician	9%	8%
Took part in a protest/demonstration	5%	3%

2. **People of color are more likely than Whites to participate in education activism.** About two-fifths of Asian Americans (44%), Blacks (41%) and Latinx (38%) participated in at least one type of education activism in the past year. Among Whites, this figure drops to slightly more than one-quarter (27%).

<i>% doing in the past year</i>	Asian Americans	Blacks	Latinx	White
At least one action	44%	41%	38%	27%
Donated money or raised funds	26%	22%	20%	15%
Signed a petition	14%	19%	18%	12%
Participated in a group	24%	16%	15%	8%
Contacted a politician	12%	8%	7%	8%
Took part in a protest/demonstration	7%	5%	8%	2%

3. **Younger adults are more likely than others to participate in education activism.** More than two-fourths of respondents age 18-24 (45%) and 40% of respondents age 25-44 participated in at least one type of education activism in the past year. This figure drops significantly for respondents age 45-64 (25%) and respondents age 65 and above (20%).

<i>% doing in the past year</i>	18-24	25-44	45-64	65+
At least one action	45%	40%	25%	20%
Donated money or raised funds	18%	23%	14%	10%
Signed a petition	18%	18%	11%	8%
Participated in a group	24%	15%	6%	3%
Contacted a politician	6%	10%	7%	9%
Took part in a protest/demonstration	7%	6%	1%	1%

4. **Parents of school-aged children are more likely than non-parents to participate in education activism.** Slightly more than two-fifths of parents (44%) and slightly more than one-quarter of non-parents (27%) participated in at least one type of education activism in the past year.

<i>% doing in the past year</i>	Parents	Non-parents
At least one action	44%	27%
Donated money or raised funds	28%	13%
Signed a petition	19%	11%
Participated in a group	17%	9%
Contacted a politician	11%	7%
Took part in a protest/demonstration	6%	3%

5. **Respondents living in urban communities are more likely than respondents living in suburban and rural communities to participate in education activism.** Approximately two-fifths (38%) of residents of urban communities participated in at least one type of education activism in the past year, compared to 31% of suburban and 28% of rural, respondents, respectively.

<i>% doing in the past year</i>	Urban community	Suburban community	Rural community
At least one action	38%	31%	28%
Donated money or raised funds	18%	18%	14%
Signed a petition	18%	13%	15%
Participated in a group	17%	10%	11%
Contacted a politician	10%	7%	10%
Took part in a protest/demonstration	7%	3%	<1%

6. **College educated respondents are more likely than others to participate in education activism.** Two-fifths of college educated respondents (40%) participated in at least one type of education activism in the past year, compared to 29% of those without a college degree.

<i>% doing in the past year</i>	No college education	College education
At least one action	29%	40%
Donated money or raised funds	25%	14%
Signed a petition	16%	13%
Participated in a group	16%	9%
Contacted a politician	13%	6%
Took part in a protest/demonstration	6%	3%

7. **Those who live in higher income households are more likely than others to participate in education activism.** More than two-fifths of respondents in households with annual incomes higher than 100K (45%) participated in at least one type of education activism in the past year. This figure drops to 26% among respondents in households with annual incomes under 30K.

<i>% doing in the past year</i>	Less than \$30K	\$30-49K	\$50-99K	\$100K and higher
At least one action	26%	30%	34%	45%
Donated money or raised funds	11%	15%	20%	30%
Signed a petition	12%	15%	14%	18%
Participated in a group	8%	11%	11%	17%
Contacted a politician	5%	7%	10%	12%
Took part in a protest/demonstration	3%	3%	4%	7%

8. **Liberals are more likely than conservatives to participate in education activism.** Two-fifths of those identifying themselves as liberals (40%) participated in at least one type of education activism in the past year, compared to 30% of conservatives and 28% of moderates.

<i>% doing in the past year</i>	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
At least one action	40%	30%	28%
Donated money or raised funds	19%	16%	18%
Signed a petition	21%	11%	11%
Participated in a group	12%	11%	11%
Contacted a politician	13%	5%	7%
Took part in a protest/demonstration	7%	3%	2%

### 3. Education activism and trust

People who trust the education system are more likely to take part in education activism than those who do not trust the system (Figure 3.1). For example, only 7% of those who have “no confidence” in the education system participated in a group whose main focus is education in the past year, whereas 27% of those who have “complete confidence” participated in a group. This pattern is consistent across all five measures.

### 4. Education activism and attitudes toward public spending on education

Proponents of higher spending on public education are more likely to participate in education activism than respondents who favor continuing to spend the same amount (Figure 4.1). This is true across public spending on pre-kindergarten, K-12 education, and higher education. Those who support keeping public spending the same are the least likely to participate in education activism.

## **5. In their own words: Other forms of education activism**

In addition to the five standard measures, respondents were invited to indicate their participation in other forms of social and political action (using an open-ended response). Approximately one in ten respondents (9%) say they have engaged in other forms of education activism in the past year, with additional 6% who have done so in the more distant past.

To summarize the open-ended comments, we present a visual depiction of the most common words used by the respondents (Figure 5.1). In this “word cloud,” the most frequently used words are displayed in a larger font. Many respondents described their actions as common pro-social behaviors such as “voted” and “volunteered.” Respondents mentioned service on the school board and the parent teacher association (PTA) as other ways to engage in education issues. Respondents also contributed to public discourse on these issues by writing to local newspapers or posting on social media.

## **6. Conclusion**

This brief provides a contemporary description of public engagement with political and social action regarding education and schools. Many adults report participation in the recent or more distant past, and many of those who have not participated in education activism to date say that they might do so in the future. We place more stock in reports of past behaviors than respondents' speculations about what they might do in the future.

Education activism is most common among women, people of color, young adults, parents, urban communities, the well-educated and financially well-off, and liberals. While some of these patterns echo past research, other findings shed new light on the link between sociodemographic background and education activism. For example, past research shows that whites are more likely to participate in the Opt Out movement, but this survey finds that people of color are more likely to engage in education activism more broadly.

Although the survey does not ask for the issues/concerns that motivate people for activism, the association between activism and attitudes (trust in the education system and attitudes toward public spending) suggests that the results may be capturing the growing movement to support and protect public education in the United States. More research on this topic is needed. Future surveys should continue tracking the prevalence of participation in education activism in the U.S.

## 7. Methodology

Results are based on online survey conducted August 28 – September 6, 2017 among a national sample of 3,117 adults 18 year of age or older using the Qualtrics Panel. Qualtrics, a marketing research firm, partners with a variety of online panel providers to supply a nationally representative sample. The sample is compiled using overall demographic quotas based on census percentages for representation (i.e., age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, and census region). To allow greater power for analysis, we over-sampled people who identify as Black, Asian and Pacific Islander, and/or Latinx. The sample is weighted to represent the U.S. adult population living in households or group quarters. For socio-demographic composition of the sample see Technical Note (available on <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/thepublicmatters/>).

The survey included several quality assurance measures, including attention checks and a speed check. Attention checks asked respondents to mark a specific answer. Respondents who failed one or more of these checks were removed from the final sample.

Most of the survey items were developed by the research team and colleagues at Teachers College. Other survey items were adapted from the General Social Survey (GSS), Gallup and Pew. The survey also included a detailed battery of survey items on sociodemographic characteristics. In addition to close-ended items, the survey asked several open-ended questions, allowing respondents to contextualized and explain their responses in greater detail.

All surveys are subject to various forms of error. One form is sampling error: the variation in results that is attributable to chance in which members of a population are randomly selected to participate in the survey. For percentages based on the entire sample, the approximate margin of error is +/- 1.8%. For subgroups, the margin of error is larger. For example, the margin of error for Black respondents is approximately +/- 4.5%.

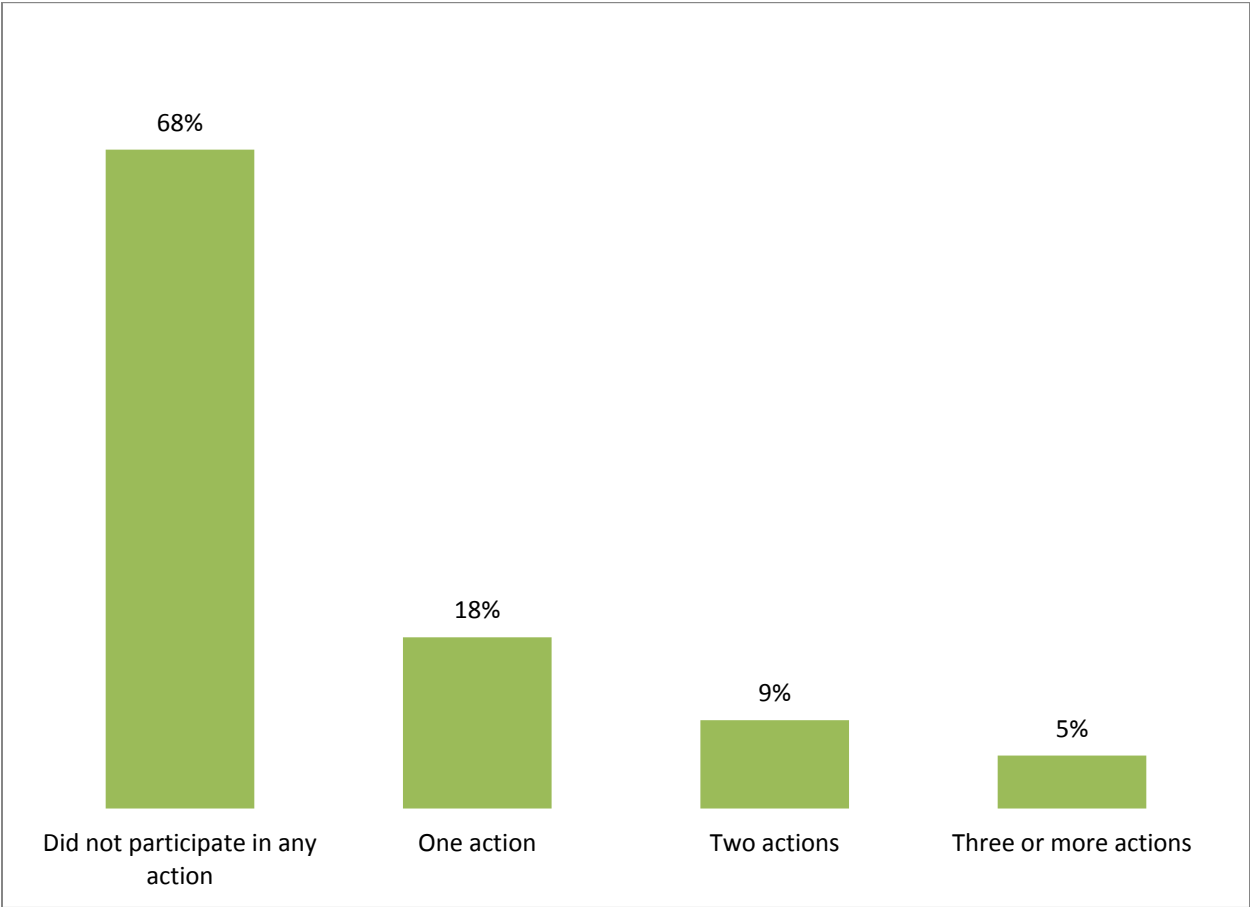
### Variables used in this brief:

1. Participation in education activism. The survey presented different forms of political and social action that people can take regarding education and schools:
  - a. Participated in a group whose main focus is education
  - b. Signed a petition about an educational issue
  - c. Donated money or raised funds for an educational group/educational issue
  - d. Took part in a protest or demonstration about an educational issue
  - e. Contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician to express your views on an educational issue
  - f. Other forms of action (please write in)

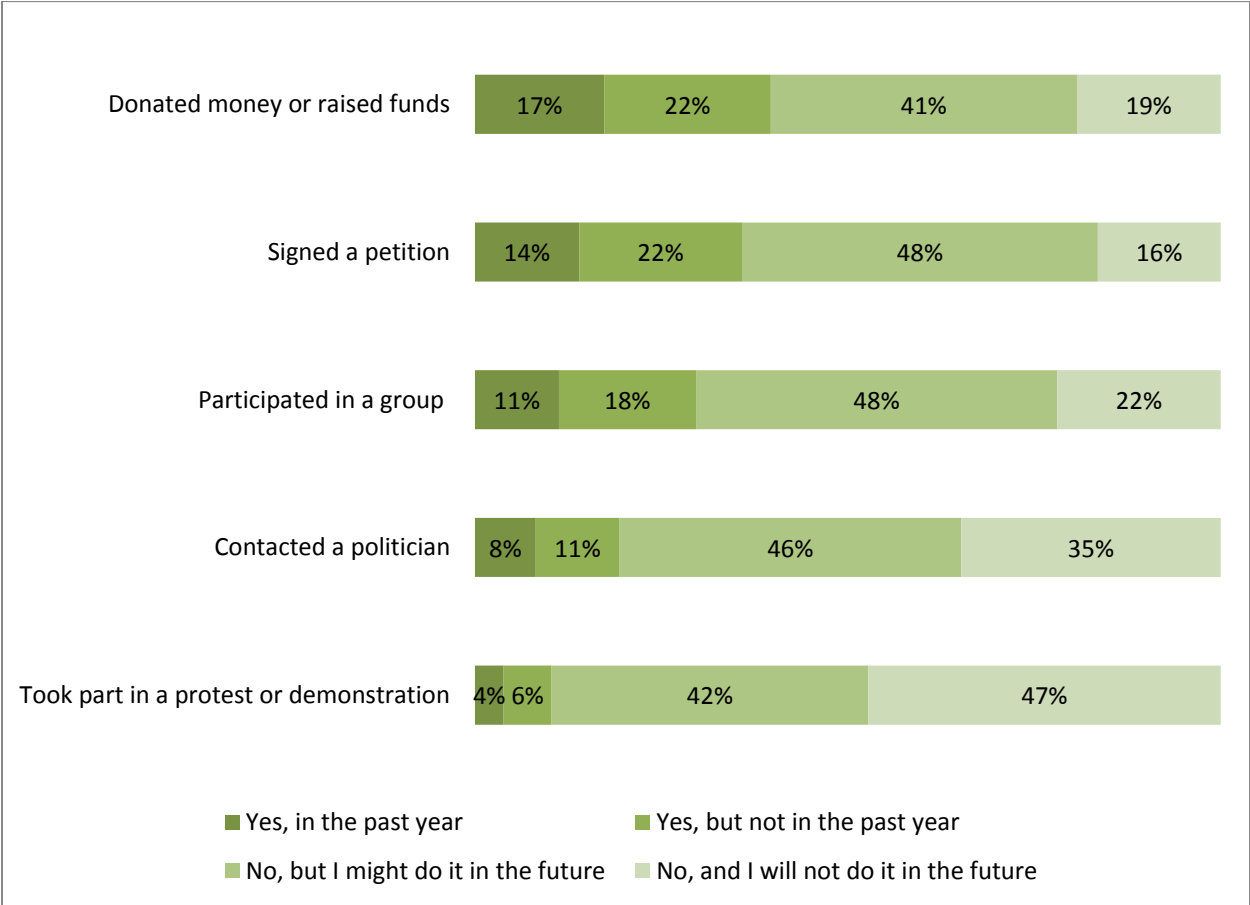
For each form of action, respondents were asked “Please indicate, for each one, whether you have done it or not.” Responses are on a 4-point scale: 1 = Yes, in the past year; 2 = Yes, but not in the past year; 3 = No, but I might do it in the future; and 4 = No, and I will not do it in the future.



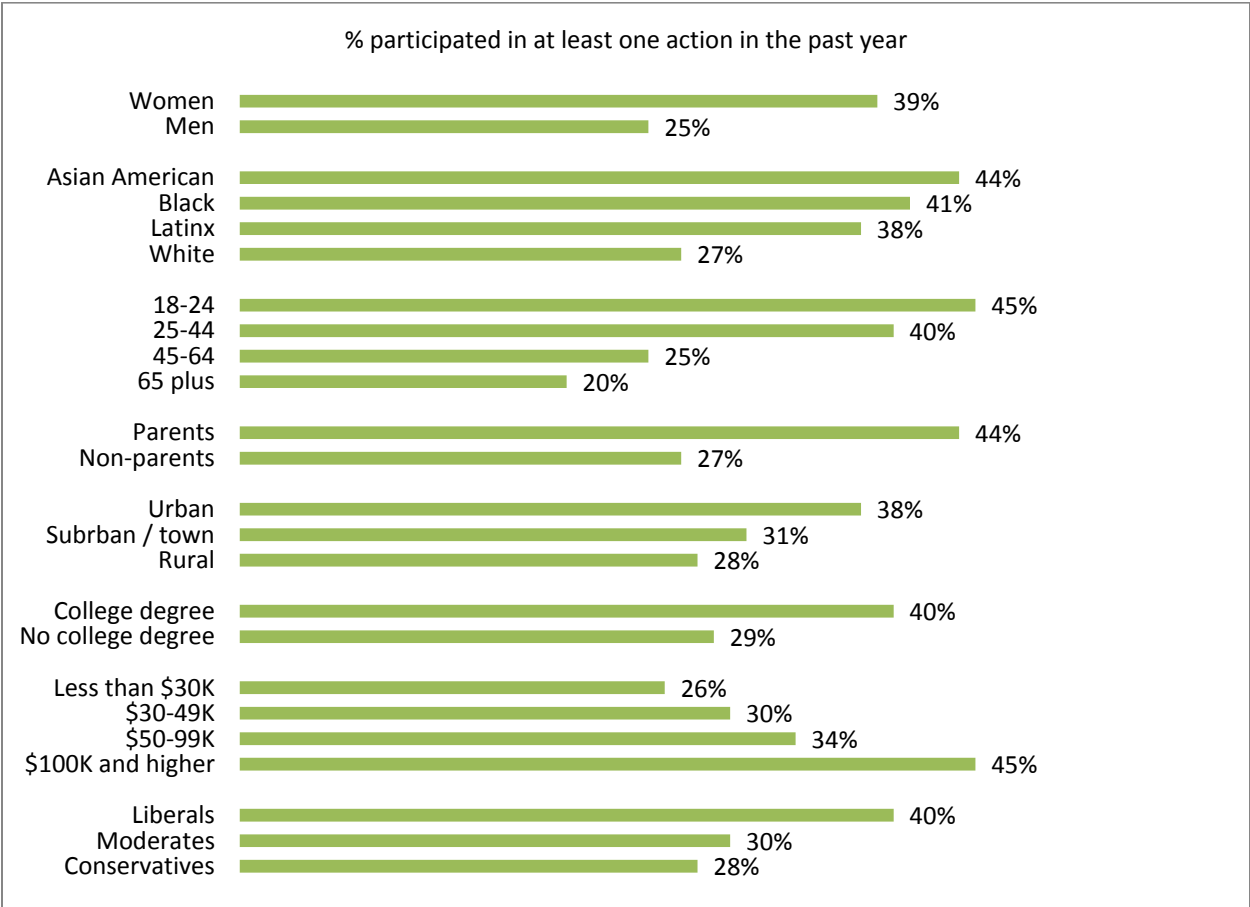
**Figure 2.1:** Number of political or social actions regarding education and schools taken in the past year



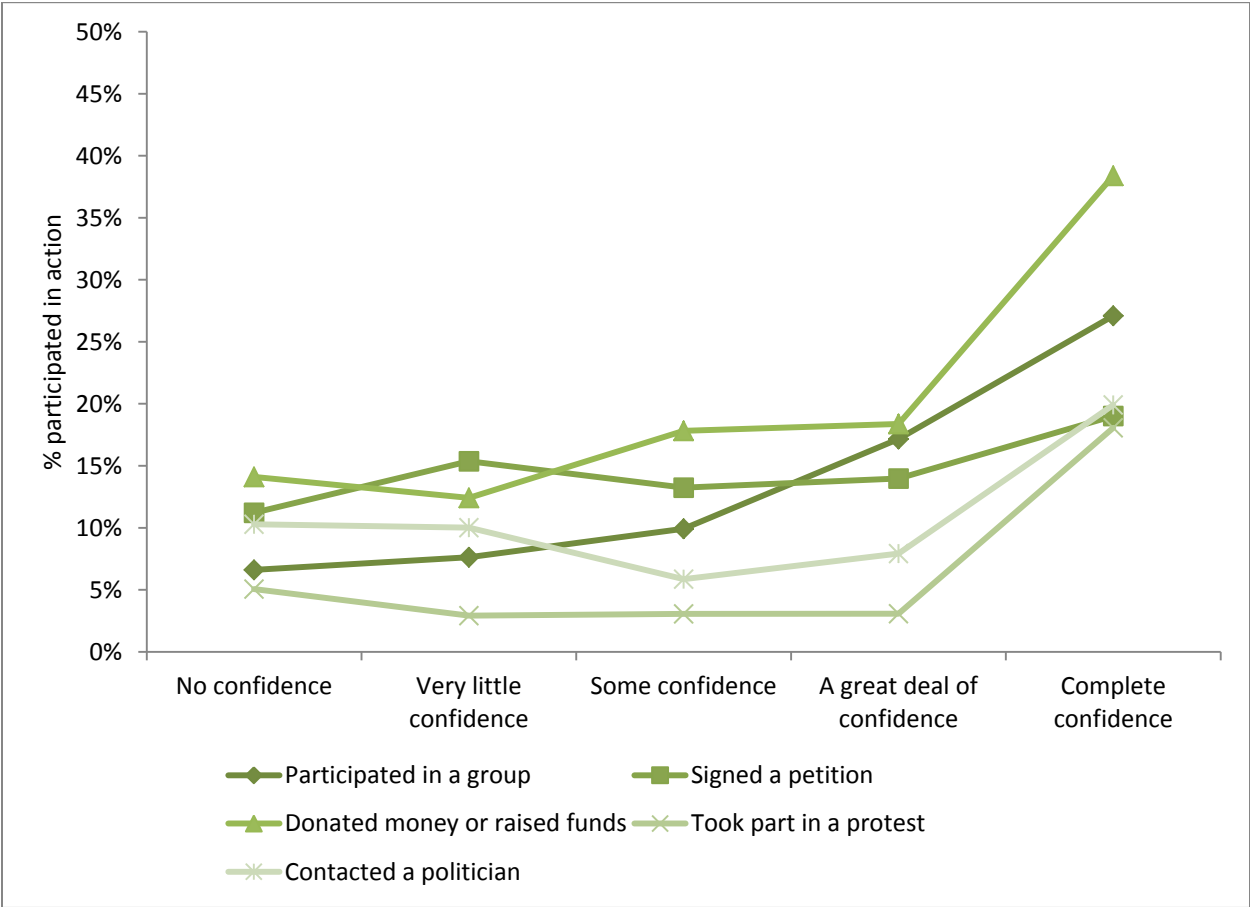
**Figure 2.2:** Engagement with five political and social actions regarding education and schools



**Figure 2.3:** Engagement with at least one political or social action, by sociodemographics



**Figure 3.1:** Confidence in the education system and engagement with five political and social actions regarding education and schools in the past year



**Figure 4.1:** Attitudes toward public spending on education and engagement with at least one political or social action in the past year

