

community chooses and transmits to the next generation appropriate values, traditions, skills, practices, and cultural norms. Civic education at its best crosses the lines between schools and communities and reflects a more inclusive definition of "education."

In general, our politics are constrained by the fact that investments can quickly be moved away from communities that decide to impose regulations (or cultural norms) that businesses don't like. It's hard to impose liberal policies, like higher taxes, if companies can move away to avoid them. It's also hard to impose conservative policies, like preferences for heterosexual marriage. It's hard to govern.

But schools (and colleges) are important economic institutions that are rooted in their communities and dependent on them. If teachers and students perform service and research, then schools become institutions that have value for their communities, and that can be governed.

In general, our politics are state-centered. Liberals want the government to accept new tasks, such as the oversight of health insurance, whereas conservatives believe that problems would be mitigated if the state were shrunk.

Governments are important, but they are not

the only institutions that matter. Furthermore, a state-centered view of politics leaves citizens little to do but inform themselves and vote. Youth civic engagement at its best epitomizes a citizen-centered politics in which people form relationships with peers, express their interests and listen to others, and then use a range of strategies, some having little to do with the state.

In general, our politics are manipulative. Experts—politicians, pundits, consultants, marketers, leaders of advocacy groups, and the like—study us, poll us, focus-group us, and assign us to gerrymandered electoral districts; they slice-and-dice us, and then they send us tailored messages designed to encourage us—or to scare us—into acting just how they want.

This is true of liberal politicians as well as conservative ones. It is true of public interest lobbies as well as business lobbies. It is true of big nonprofits as well as political parties.

It is also true of many ostensibly civic groups. For example, CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) has been part of the movement to increase youth voter turnout. Techniques for that purpose are becoming increasingly sophisticated. In the 1990s, you might just mail people flyers reminding them to register. Then

organizations began to test various messages with focus groups before they printed their flyers. Now they do true experiments, randomly selecting some addresses to receive one flyer instead of another and keeping track of the response rates. (The messages that people like best in focus groups often perform worst in the field.) This is just an example of growing efficiency in public-interest, nonpartisan politics.

Americans know they are being manipulated, and they resent it. They want to be able to decide for themselves what is important, what should be done, and then act in common to address their problems. They are interested in what other people think; they want to get out of what students call their "bubbles." They want open-ended, citizen-centered politics in which professionals do not predetermine the outcomes.

Civic engagement, at its best, is open-ended politics. We don't try to manipulate our students or neighbors into adopting opinions or solutions that we think are right—at least, we shouldn't. We give them opportunities to deliberate and reflect and then act in ways that seem best to them. In a time of increasingly sophisticated manipulative politics, these opportunities are precious.



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Developing the Next Generation of Informed Voters

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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The New York Campus Compact Occasional Papers are publications designed to advance an understanding of and appreciation for collegiate civic engagement in its many forms.

Occasional Papers will describe promising practices in service learning and civic engagement, and the role of civic engagement programs in fulfilling institutional missions and promoting student learning.

Manuscripts are invited that represent the viewpoints and experiences of the variety of individuals who have a stake in civic engagement - presidents, academic administrators, faculty, students, and community partners.

Publication guidelines and contact information can be obtained on the New York Campus Compact web site - www.nycc.cornell.edu.

Editor's Note: On September 15, 2008, Peter Levine, Research Director of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University and Director of CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement), which is part of the Tisch College, and author of "The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens," delivered a presentation on engaging youth in the voting process at SUNY Geneseo. With his permission, Dr. Levine's remarks are featured in this edition of *the New York Campus Compact Occasional Papers*.

The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of Informed Voters

by Peter Levine
Tufts University

▶ Young people are very engaged in this election. In the primaries, youth turnout doubled compared to 2000. Anecdotes and some survey evidence show that young people are also:

- talking about the election
- watching videos and speeches online
- "friending" politicians (Obama has surpassed 1 million Facebook "friends")

Why?

I've been saying that the kids and the candidates are both acting differently. (Excuse me for saying "kids;" it alliterates with "candidates.")

The kids are more engaged with social issues and causes. They volunteer at higher rates than their parents did. In 2004, they voted at a higher rate than we had seen in a

decade. Last year, we talked to nearly 400 college students on 13 campuses. They were pretty much randomly selected, and almost all of them had been involved with some kind of service or activism. They care about issues ranging from the economy to global warming. The unresolved question for them was whether politics was relevant.

Candidates are doing a better job showing that politics can be relevant. A hopeful, problem-solving approach attracts people who want to address social problems. That's part of the Obama appeal, and another part is his biography as a community activist, which resonates with kids who have performed service. It also helps literally to campaign to young people. In the 1980s and 1990s, campaign resources were carefully targeted at older voters. That created a vicious cycle that has now turned virtuous. I was at the University of Maryland last spring and Obama, Huckabee, and Chelsea Clinton all visited.

Reporters ask me what the candidates are doing to reach young people online. I say that this is the wrong question. Obama's Facebook page is not causing young people to "friend" him. It's not better than McCain's Facebook page. And Obama's campaign didn't even create his page—independent students did. So the online activity is mostly driven by the kids, not the candidates. That is a very important shift in power.

By the way, the increase in youth turnout is not all about Obama. It started in 2004, when he was not yet on the ballot. It propelled Mike Huckabee to his victory in Iowa—and it was a deliberate part of his strategy there. And overall, a majority of young primary voters (counting both parties) voted for someone other than Obama. He came in first, but he did not utterly dominate.

I would claim that the increase in youth turnout is a Good Thing. Why?

It is a sign or symptom that kids are involved in other ways besides voting. Voting doesn't stand on its own. It correlates with things like following the news, caring about social issues, talking to other people about issues, and belonging to groups. These forms of participation are good for young people.

Lots of evidence shows that kids who are engaged with social institutions do better in life. They are more likely to stay in school and stay out of trouble. This is consistent with the psychological theory known as "positive youth development," which says that if you want young people to thrive, you should give them opportunities to contribute. It is not effective to treat them as a bundle of problems or potential problems and test, treat, survey, and discipline them. They need a feeling of purpose and value that is undermined by treating them as crises-waiting-to-happen. Service and activism programs have been found to prevent pregnancy and reduce dropout.

By the way, I doubt that voting itself is much of a positive developmental experience. If you could get an at-risk kid to vote but not do anything else, that probably wouldn't help him or her to thrive. That's why I said that the rise in voting is a good sign or symptom of greater youth engagement. And indeed, youth are do-

ing better than they were in the 80s and 90s—teen crime, violence, pregnancy, and drug use are all down.

What I just said was a very non-political take on voting, but of course voting also has political value. So let me turn to that.

Youth voting is important because young people have different interests than older people, and they need to be represented. For instance, Social Security is a bigger issue for seniors than for youths, and it gets disproportionate attention from politicians. Unemployment for ages 16-19 is 18%, compared to 3.8 percent for ages 25 and older. But candidates never talk about unemployment as a youth issue—because the young don't vote enough.

More importantly, we need to tap young people's energies to address our national challenges, and especially the challenges that involve young people themselves, such as the high school dropout rate.

My list of grievous national challenges would include the dropout rate (which is about one third), the enormous deficit, homeland security threats, and global warming. Your list might be different, but we all agree that the country must deal with complex and serious problems.

America has never overcome any major challenge without unleashing the skills, energies, and passions of millions of our citizens. Collaboration is the genius of American democracy.

Collaboration and problem-solving are in decline. People are substantially less likely to work on community projects or to attend meetings than they were a generation ago.

This decline most seriously affects working-class and poor people and the communities in which they live. People without college experience have virtually disappeared from civil society. But we need all our people to participate in meetings and work on public problems.

If we want this to happen, we must focus on youth; it is very hard to think of programs, projects, or even movements that have changed passive adults into active citizens.

Again, voting is only one way to address public problems. It's part of a package, not the be-all and end-all. But if young people are

NOT voting, chances are they're not finding ways to address serious problems. Maybe all they are doing is direct, one-on-one service, which is fine but inadequate.

So young people are involved in this election, and that's a Good Thing. Can we relax? No, for several crucial reasons.

First, youth participation is very uneven. If we look at college students and young adults with some college experience, about one in four voted in the primaries. But only one in 14 young adults WITHOUT college experience voted. And they represent half of all young people.

Class differences in political engagement are severe, and worse than they were twenty years ago. The gaps are just as bad for volunteering, joining groups, attending meetings, and working on community projects.

Part of the reason is that it's harder to reach young adults in the workforce than to reach college students. Especially nowadays, young workers are dispersed. They're not all together at a unionized factory; they're all apart at strip malls and convenience stores.

But we also make matters worse by reserving almost all of the experiences that connect young people to politics for our more successful students. So in high school, you are much more likely to have a student government, a school newspaper, a service opportunity, or a discussion of current events if you're on track to college. College provides additional experiences that you miss if you don't attend college. And many special opportunities are competitive and monopolized by strong students. Those who need civic education most, get it least.

There are other gaps besides the big class gap. Turnout differs enormously from state to state, in part because levels of competition are so different. Youth turnout is often twice as high in Minnesota as it is down the big river in Mississippi. That suggests that the issue isn't "youth," it's how youths engage in various contexts. And we can change those contexts through political reform.

Second, there are big differences in opinion about the current election.

Third, and most important, there is no reason

to think that engagement WITH an election will translate into engagement AFTER the election. Youth turnout rose sharply in 1992, the year of Bush I versus Clinton and Perot. Nevertheless, the 1990s were a decade of low and declining youth engagement. Voting and other forms of political engagement rise and fall in response to major political events. Other forms of engagement shift gradually as a result of deep social factors such as changes in the economy, technology, and demographics.

When we asked people recently whether they think they will be involved with the issues debated DURING the election AFTER Nov. 4, their expectations were fairly low. But Americans are philosophically in favor of citizen engagement. They clearly believe that things work better when citizens and the government collaborate. And we know, from social science, that they are right. Schools, for example, are much more successful when parents and other citizens and also other organizations (like churches and colleges) share responsibility for education.

So how can we sustain engagement after November 4th?

For K-12 teachers, probably the most important message is to promote civil, balanced discussions of current events both during the election and in the years to come. Kids who study civics know more and are more interested than kids who don't. Some research finds that the whole impact of civics classes on civic engagement is thanks to the discussions that happen in class.

Promoting discussion in class can also send off interesting ripples. Mike McDevitt has found that such discussions contribute to conversations at home and even raise parents' voter turnout.

These discussions need to be moderated, which is a skill. It is especially challenging for younger teachers to moderate current events discussions because the examples we see on TV are awful shouting matches, and few classes used discussion back in the 1980s and 1990s when today's younger teachers were students. They need professional development. There are also good materials and models from the National Issues Forums, Public Agenda Founda-

tion, Choices, and other groups.

We also need to change reward structures so that teachers CAN promote discussion of current events. Skills and knowledge related to current events are not measured on tests, which is a disincentive. There used to be whole courses devoted to reading the newspaper and discussing issues, but those have been cut. And controversial discussions can get teachers into hot water. They need policymakers' support.

For other citizens, we need policies to institutionalize and promote civic engagement between elections and throughout the lifespan. We have tested some proposed policies in national surveys and some ideas attract strong, bipartisan support.

There is strong support for expanding national and community service, which means federally run or funded programs that range from the Peace Corps and VISTA to City Year and YouthBuild. Most of these programs have to turn away the majority of their applicants. They provide pay or tuition benefits, but the rewards are very modest. There is strong support for increasing these opportunities. On Sept 11th in New York City, both presidential candidates took a "time out" from campaigning to endorse the idea.

So it appears that national and community service programs will expand. Those will give some people opportunities to be engaged. Much depends on the nature of the engagement. Providing direct, hands-on service is Okay, but that's a lot like a regular job. It's important for the national and community service programs to involve elements of deliberation, collaboration, and problem solving. The Peace Corps and VISTA certainly do so already. The other programs may need to be rethought somewhat.

There is also strong support for more public deliberation. An organization on whose board I sit, AmericaSpeaks, has developed a proposal called "Millions of Voices." Millions of Americans would be recruited to discuss a particular issue, such as climate change. They would develop ideas, deliberate, and vote. Congress would be required to hold legislative hearings on their recommendations.

In my opinion, these special opportunities

and processes are important, but insufficient. They cannot be allowed to stand alone, so that when you're NOT voting, working full-time for an AmeriCorps program, or attending a deliberation, you're not involved.

I would like to see us restructure our regular programs and institutions so that they encourage more civic engagement. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—the most influential education legislation in 30 years—continues a recent trend of centralizing power of schools. What kids study is increasingly determined by what is tested. Experts in places like Princeton, New Jersey write the tests. All kinds of value judgments and decisions about priorities can no longer be made at the local level. As a result, citizen involvement in schools is no longer as important as it once was.

In fact, citizen involvement in schools has been falling for thirty years, and while the reasons may be complex, one cause is the gradual takeover of education by small numbers of experts, epitomized but not having begun with No Child Left Behind.

Reversing that trend is controversial.

Education is just one example—we could also be talking about how to increase citizen involvement in the environment, crime prevention, and even national security. But that's the hard part and there are many tough issues and resistant constituencies.

Let me end by suggesting why all this is important.

Civic engagement, at its best, is an alternative to politics as we know it. Good examples of service-learning, youth-led research, youth media production, and deliberation of current issues are profoundly countercultural. They exemplify a kind of politics that is in desperately short supply today.

In general, we treat young people as baskets of problems or potential problems. But civic engagement embodies the alternative approach of "positive youth development."

In general, we see education as the job of teachers and principals in schools (public or private). It's a specialized task to be measured by experts. Success then boils down to passing tests. But education should be a community-wide function, the process by which a whole

