

# politics



## The Missing Link of Responsible Civic Education



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*A publication of the University of Virginia Center for Politics.*



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*Cluster sampling methods and data collection herein conducted independently by the UVA Center for Survey Research.*

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The Youth Leadership Initiative is a division of the University of Virginia Center for Politics.



## ABSTRACT

In asserting that politics is a missing link of civic education, one might be tempted to believe that there is a viable, albeit incomplete, practice of civic education in America's schools. Unfortunately, this would be an inaccurate perception not only of the overall existence of such efforts, but also of their effectiveness. However, before treading down the well-worn path in civic education research that typically heaps much of the blame for our national civic disengagement on schools, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the problem.

Schools alone cannot deliver effective civic education. Quality civic education — which, in a self-governing society, must include knowledge of and participation in politics — comprises an intricate matrix of support and reinforcement where parental involvement and classroom instruction serve as foundations upon which trust and early formative civic participation are built. This in turn helps to develop whole communities of interest that produce engaged citizens at the apex. In theory, when the entire process functions effectively, the result is a culture of civic engagement and civic education nationwide.

Within this complex structure, all parts are interdependent; therefore, when any one component is weak, it jeopardizes the strength of the entire structure. Unfortunately, we found sufficient evidence that every component of the existing structure is weakening, and the structural integrity of the whole is suffering from prolonged neglect.

This research is the compilation of responses of 2,028 students surveyed in 114 schools in twenty states. The study serves as an inspection of the civic education structure in America, and offers suggestions for building a culture of civic engagement.



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# METHODOLOGY

In collaboration with Dr. Larry Sabato of the University of Virginia, Dr. Richard Niemi of the University of Rochester, Dr. Steve Finkel of the University of Virginia, Dr. Thomas Guterbock of the University of Virginia, and the University of Virginia Center for Survey Research, a national survey was developed and administered in the form of a written questionnaire during the months of October and November of 2002. A copy of the full survey appears in Appendix A.

The respondents for the survey were selected using a cluster-sample design. The margin of error for the post-test phase of this survey is +/- 2.6 percent at the 95 percent confidence level, and is based on the results obtained through variance estimation on all surveys. Table 1 represents margin of error estimates for a given number of cases for given proportions that account for the design-effect resulting from cluster sampling. For relationships between variables cited in this report, significance indicates a 95 percent level of confidence.

**Table A-1 — YLI Post Test Margin of Error Estimates**

N	EFFECTIVE N	PROPORTIONS FOR A GIVEN ITEM					
		10-90	20-80	30-70	40-60	50-50	SRS 50-50*
100	89	6.3%	8.4%	9.6%	10.2%	10.4%	9.8%
200	47	8.7%	11.6%	13.2%	14.2%	14.4%	6.9%
300	189	4.3%	5.7%	6.6%	7.0%	7.1%	5.7%
400	240	3.8%	5.1%	5.8%	6.2%	6.3%	4.9%
500	445	2.8%	3.7%	4.3%	4.6%	4.7%	4.4%
800	478	2.7%	3.6%	4.1%	4.4%	4.5%	3.5%
900	403	2.9%	3.9%	4.5%	4.8%	4.9%	3.3%
1200	445	2.8%	3.7%	4.3%	4.6%	4.7%	2.8%
1300	528	2.6%	3.4%	3.9%	4.2%	4.3%	2.7%
1400	938	1.9%	2.6%	2.9%	3.1%	3.2%	2.6%
1500	768	2.1%	2.8%	3.2%	3.5%	3.5%	2.5%
1600	713	2.2%	2.9%	3.4%	3.6%	3.7%	2.5%
1700	1007	1.9%	2.5%	2.8%	3.0%	3.1%	2.4%
1800	665	2.3%	3.0%	3.5%	3.7%	3.8%	2.3%
1900	1116	1.8%	2.3%	2.7%	2.9%	2.9%	2.2%
2000	1105	1.8%	2.4%	2.7%	2.9%	2.9%	2.2%
2100	1465	1.5%	2.0%	2.3%	2.5%	2.6%	2.1%
2200	1317	1.6%	2.2%	2.5%	2.6%	2.7%	2.1%
2300	1618	1.5%	1.9%	2.2%	2.4%	2.4%	2.0%
2400	1546	1.5%	2.0%	2.3%	2.4%	2.5%	2.0%
2500	1388	1.6%	2.1%	2.4%	2.6%	2.6%	2.0%

\* For reference, SRS 50-50 indicates the margin of error for a 50-50 split question given a simple random sample

Within the population of students participating, the specific goals of the research were to:

- Measure political knowledge, attitudes and values of these American high school students in grades 9-12
- Determine the degree of participation among these young people in both political and non-political community activities
- Examine the extent to which politics and political participation are part of any of their current civic education courses
- Determine whether service learning projects are preparing these students for participation in politics

The sampling of classrooms, i.e., cluster sampling, is a common sampling technique in education studies as an alternative to simple random sampling. Cluster sampling overcomes many of the obstacles involved in sampling youth. A full list of students is not required for cluster samples, demand on classroom time is reduced, and labor involved in obtaining permission of teachers, school

administrators and parents is minimized. The result is a design effect that lowers the confidence level that estimates herein can be generalized to the full population of students. This effect has been considered in the development of the estimated +/- 2.6 percent margin of error.

The research was conducted as a quasi-experimental study based on Solomon's four-group experimental design. Individual civics classrooms randomly sampled for inclusion in the treatment groups were selected from schools known to have at least one teacher who planned to use the resources of the National Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) sponsored by the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia. The Youth Leadership Initiative is a national program offering free civic-related teaching resources to public and private K–12 schools nationwide.

Schools participating in the control (non-treatment) groups were randomly selected from among those registered with the National Council for Social Studies and from a random selection of schools generated from a national list provided by MDR Market Data Retrieval. To ensure random distribution at the respondent level, participating teachers were instructed to administer the survey to their earliest class of the day. The resulting set of study groups is summarized in Table A-2.

Group	Pre-test	Treatment (YLI)
A	YES	YES
B	YES	NO
C	NO	YES
D	NO	NO

## ■ RECRUITMENT

The classroom coordinators sought high school teachers of year-long government, civics, or social studies classes to take part in the "Politics and You" study. The sample was divided into four groups: A, B, C, and D. Teachers in groups A and C agreed to use Youth Leadership Initiative lesson plans and at least one YLI resource (i.e., mock election, e-Congress, "A More Perfect Union" CD-Rom, or Democracy Corps). Teachers in groups B and D were asked not to use any YLI materials in the classroom. Middle schools, history teachers, school administrators, schools on block schedules, and semester-long classes were among those disqualified from participating. Classroom coordinators screened for these by name and type of school, by speaking with school receptionists, or by speaking directly with the teacher. They also screened to prevent the recruitment of multiple teachers from the same school.

Group A recruitment began in September 2002. Group B began in October, with an additional sample (MDR) added in November. Recruiting for Groups C and D began simultaneously in December. Over the schools' holiday vacations, C and D teachers were telephoned at home and e-mailed. Recruitment of C and D continued through February 2003.

Contact was made primarily by telephone. The initial calls were to ascertain from the receptionist the existence and/or eligibility of the school and teacher. If necessary, subsequent calls were made to contact the teacher. Beginning with the second call, messages were left at each possible attempt (i.e., if a secretary or answering machine were available) either on the teacher's or department's voicemail or with school secretaries. Ineligible respondents (i.e., department chairs who did not teach and teachers in other departments) often referred classroom coordinators to other government teachers at the school, or offered to pass along information. A minimum of three, and as many as twelve, phone attempts were made per teacher.

The large number of attempts was often due to teachers limited availability during the school day, or those who gave specific callback times when they were not, in fact, available. Home phone numbers were researched online for those teachers for whom no school number was available or who were difficult to contact at school during the day. Teachers were called at home at night and on weekends, often in addition to being called at school during the day when applicable.

When direct contact was made by telephone with a teacher, the classroom coordinator first determined eligibility of the teacher and class. The classroom coordinator then gave the teacher background information on the study, CSR and the Center for Politics, and outlined the requirements for and timeline of participation. If the teacher agreed, he or she verified the contact information, including the school's name and mailing address, the teacher's e-mail and phone number, and the name of the class, grade level, and number of students.

Those teachers who did not receive an advance letter informing them about the study (i.e., Group B MDR sample) were faxed the information letter. In many cases, schools were faxed prior to direct contact with the teacher. It was felt that it would be more efficient to send information beforehand, once the school was determined to be eligible through conversations with receptionists. All teachers with valid e-mail addresses were contacted and given information by e-mail in addition to attempts by telephone. Information was sent by fax, e-mail, or U.S. mail upon request by a teacher or administrator. Often, once a teacher was recruited by the classroom coordinator, principals and/or other school administrators were contacted by phone and/or fax to gain permission for the teacher to participate.

Calling was done in April of 2003 to schedule the earliest date on which each teacher would administer the post-test questionnaires to the class. Reminder calling was done in May and June for teachers whose date for completing the survey had passed, but whose questionnaires had not yet been received. Classroom coordinators ascertained whether the teachers had any questions or concerns with the survey. They attempted to convince teachers who had not yet completed the survey to do so. A few teachers were unable to participate, and returned the questionnaires. Some claimed to have already returned them. Some requested another set of questionnaires. All efforts were made to facilitate completion of the questionnaires.

The study population includes students in participating YLI schools and non-YLI schools within similar geographic areas. As of April 2004, more than 5,000 teachers in all fifty states were participating in the YLI, but at the time the sample was selected, use of YLI materials was most prevalent in the state of Virginia; therefore, roughly half the schools selected for inclusion in treatment Group A and treatment Group C were from Virginia. One hundred and seven classes participated in the post-test phase of the survey. The selection yielded the geographic breakdown presented in Table A-3:

Table A-3			
Pre-test Geographical Classification			
Group	Non-Virginia	Virginia	Total
A	353	462	815
B	229	302	531
<b>Total</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>764</b>	<b>1346</b>
Post Test Geographical Classification			
Group	Non-Virginia	Virginia	Total
A	229	238	467
B	120	175	295
C	266	316	582
D	404	280	684
<b>Total</b>	<b>1019</b>	<b>1009</b>	<b>2028</b>

This report relies on the respected research of numerous political scientists and civic education organizations across the nation, but its primary source was derived by amalgamating the post-test Phase Two portion of the Solomon Four design, collectively representing twenty states. As noted in the various figures, some of the tables in this report represent findings from all post-test questionnaires, some are based only on the students who completed the pre-test as well, and some show analysis of change in students' answers between the pre-test and post-test questionnaires.

Forty-four percent of the respondents were male, 52 percent female. The racial breakdown was: 11 percent African American, 7 percent Hispanic (includes students who selected Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban American, and Hispanic or other Latin American), 6 percent Asian American, 71 percent White or Caucasian, 4 percent Native American; 6 percent selected other. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In identifying their racial background from the responses offered, students were invited to check all that applied; thus the cumulative total is greater than 100%.

## ■ SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

The questionnaires were administered in class by the recruited teachers. Great care was taken to afford anonymity to the responding students. A special technique using pre-numbered labels and sealed envelopes was used so that CSR could match the pre-test and post-test questionnaires for a given student without knowing the student's name. When taking the pre-test, each student received a pair of identically-numbered ID labels. One label was affixed to the pre-test questionnaire, the other was placed in a sealed envelope upon which the student wrote his or her name. These envelopes were returned to CSR for safekeeping. At the time of the post-test, the batch of envelopes was returned to the classroom teacher, who distributed the envelopes to the students. Each student then applied his or her own numbered label to the post-test questionnaire. This procedure was pre-approved by the University of Virginia's Institutional Review Board for Social and Behavioral Sciences.

## ■ TREATMENT

There are different definitions of the terms "politics" and "political participation". More traditional definitions of these terms have included voting, lobbying, correspondence and interaction with elected and appointed government officials, running for office, and other similar activities. Another school of thought sees politics and political participation as going beyond formal government interaction, including activities that employ less conventional methods of social and group interaction as a means of moving society in a particular direction. The Civil Rights movement is a classic example of how groups can participate in a political movement largely driven by forces outside the more traditional relations with government. Though these definitions of politics and political participation differ significantly in approach, both share the same larger civic-related goal of defining, influencing, and contributing to the American political landscape.

In this research, civic education and civic engagement are defined as follows:

- Political (Civic) Attitudes, Virtues and Values: Dispositions, values and predispositions related to politics, government and political participation.
- Political (Civic) Engagement: The direct observation, participation in, and/or influence of the political process in America, specifically as it relates to political campaigns and elections, political movements, and the governing and policymaking arenas.
- Political (Civic) Knowledge: Intellectual skills and textbook facts necessary to observe and comprehend the mechanics and institutions of the political process in America, specifically as it relates to political campaigns and elections, political movements, and the governing and policymaking arenas.

The measures of political participation in this research were broadly defined to include not just traditional measures, but also behaviors such as the disruption of government meetings and participation in peaceful protests, among others, examining the degree to which each of these activities connects the individual to his or her place within a self-governing, civic society.

This research examines civic engagement, attitudes and knowledge of politics among American high school students in grades nine through twelve. Its specific purpose is to better understand the problem of declining youth participation in the American democratic process of campaigns and elections as well as declining trust in the political process, to thereby assist in enhancing civic education and fostering long-term civic engagement nationwide.

The specific programs utilized within this research are based on five different pedagogical techniques, each with a body of corresponding lesson plans. Developed by the Center for Politics' National Youth Leadership Initiative, each set of activities and lessons offers specific but varying degrees and types of political participation.

The following provides a brief synopsis of each of the program components utilized during the treatment phase of this research. All the programs put direct emphasis on political participation.

### *Youth Leadership Initiative Program Components*

**Mock Election** Each year, the Youth Leadership Initiative conducts the largest online mock election in the nation using electronic cyber-ballots specifically tailored to each student's home voting location. Participating teachers may also access an extensive bank of online lesson plans on topics ranging from campaign advertising to reapportionment to the presidential nominating process.

Students use the YLI website to research candidates, take a political ideology quiz, and draft letters to current and prospective elected officials.

**E-Congress** The Youth Leadership Initiative's e-Congress is an online simulation that allows middle and high school students nationwide to research, draft, debate, and pass original legislation. Students use the YLI website to connect with congressional leaders and their peers nationwide to share ideas, request expertise and explore the role of interest groups in the legislative process. Students serve as committee members deciding the direction of legislation from around the country, and later serve as individual representatives as they cast their votes on a virtual House floor. Over the course of the simulation, students develop skills in political participation, research, community awareness, writing, problem-solving, and consensus-building.

**A More Perfect Union** This state-of-the-art interactive CD-ROM allows students to manage a "live" campaign for the United States Senate in the fictitious state of Franklin. Using supportive lesson plans on the YLI website, students explore campaign headquarters and the state of Franklin, plan their candidate's schedule, learn the intricacies of managing an entire campaign staff, purchase campaign ads and develop statewide strategies to promote their candidate, and order polls to learn the issues of greatest concern to Franklin's citizens.

**Democracy Corps** This program represents the most intense level of direct exposure to and interaction with elected representatives and government officials as well as local, state and national political and community issues. Designed as a potential remedy for service learning programs that fail to make a connection to politics, the Democracy Corps program attempts to supplement programs with "civic learning" and helps students understand why they should be involved in American democracy, teaching them — through experiential learning — how to be actively engaged.

**Lesson Plans** In addition to the lesson plans that support each of the activities above, the Youth Leadership Initiative also offers rigorous teacher-developed course units correlated to each state's unique academic standards in government, civics, and technology.

## ■ KEY POST-TEST VARIABLES

### *Independent Variables*

The primary set of indicators for YLI involvement and dosage (level of exposure to YLI) were derived from the teacher questionnaire administered to teachers in YLI participating schools. Four measures were created to indicate whether the teachers had used the mock election, e-Congress, Democracy Corps, or "A More Perfect Union" CD-Rom in their classes. Another five facets measured teachers' responses on their use of YLI lesson plans supporting the mock election, e-Congress, Democracy Corps, "A More Perfect Union", and other lesson plans designed to teach campaign and election techniques and/or the foundations of American government. A final measure indicated any YLI involvement as reported by the teacher.

### *Dependent Variable Indices*

Several indices were created by aggregating items from the students' post-test questionnaires. These indices included interest in politics, efficacy, trust of government, citizen responsibility, pride in politics, past and future political participation and political knowledge. Student responses were excluded in the calculation of the index if a student had not completed a majority of the items. Reliability scores for dependent measures are between .6 and .8, indicating that the components of each index combined together well, providing the basis for their combination into these latent variable measures. The following section indicates the component variables found in each index used in analysis.

## YLI Post-test Dependent Variable Indices

### INTEREST IN MEDIA

- How often would you say you pay attention to news about politics on television?
- How often would you say you pay attention to news about politics in the newspaper?
- How often would you say you pay attention to news about politics on the internet?

### POLITICAL EFFICACY

- Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that ordinary people can't really understand what is going on.
- Ordinary people have no say in what the government does.
- I feel well prepared to participate in political life.
- Public officials really don't care what ordinary people think.
- If I wanted to make my political views known, I would know where and how to contact the right people.

### RESPONSIBILITY OF CITIZENS IN A DEMOCRACY

- Do you think it is essential, somewhat important, or not that important for citizens in a democracy to vote in local elections?
- Do you think it is essential, somewhat important, or not that important for citizens in a democracy to attend community meetings or other local political events?
- Do you think it is essential, somewhat important, or not that important for citizens in a democracy to follow political issues in the newspaper or on television?
- Do you think it is essential, somewhat important, or not that important for citizens in a democracy to work on campaigns to elect candidates for political office?
- Do you think it is essential, somewhat important, or not that important for citizens in a democracy to protest peacefully against laws the citizens think are unjust?
- Do you think it is essential, somewhat important, or not that important for citizens in a democracy to join a group that supports the citizen's views on important political issues?
- Do you think it is essential, somewhat important, or not that important for citizens in a democracy to vote for candidates for the Senate and House of Representatives?
- Do you think it is essential, somewhat important, or not that important for citizens in a democracy to vote for President?

### TRUST INDEX

- How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right — just about always, some of the time, or almost never?
- How much trust do you have in the Supreme Court?
- How much trust do you have in political parties?
- How much trust do you have in Congress?
- How much trust do you have in the President?

### PRIDE IN POLITICS

- Do you agree or disagree that most politicians act unethically and are just out for themselves?
- Do you agree or disagree that if the American people made their own decisions instead of relying on politicians, the country could be better off?
- Do you agree or disagree that there is a lot about our form of government that you are proud of?
- Do you agree or disagree that Americans disagree so much about the right things to do in politics that we need politicians to resolve these disputes?
- Do you agree or disagree that our government would run better if decisions were left up to independent experts and not the elected politicians?
- Do you agree or disagree that "compromise" in politics is really just selling out one's principles?
- Do you agree or disagree that politics is a good thing?

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

- Have you joined a group to solve problems in the country or in your community?
- Have you attended campaign meetings or rallies?
- Have you taken part in peaceful protests against government policies?
- Have you displayed or worn the American flag?
- Have you taken part in a sit-in or disruption of government meetings or offices?
- Have you worked for a political party or candidate?
- Have you contacted an elected official or agency in the local government?
- Have you contacted an elected official or agency in the US government?
- Have you collected signatures for a petition?
- Have you tried to persuade someone else to vote for a candidate or party you support?
- Have you worn a button or displayed a bumper sticker or yard sign in support of a political cause or a candidate?
- Have you discussed political issues with your friends or family?
- Have you encouraged adults to register to vote?
- Have you donated money to a political group or a cause?
- Have you written a letter to the media or posted something on the internet in support of a political issue or cause?
- Have you voted in a student government election?
- Have you voted in a mock election?

## FUTURE PARTICIPATION

- In the future, how likely are you to ... register to vote?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... vote in local or state elections?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... join a group to solve problems in the country or in your community?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... attend campaign meetings or political rallies?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... take part in peaceful protests against government policies?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... display or wear the American flag?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... take part in a sit-in or disruption of government meetings or offices?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... work for a political party or candidate?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... contact an elected official or agency in the local government?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... contact an elected official or agency in the U.S. government?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... collect signatures for a petition?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... try to persuade someone else to vote for a candidate or party you support?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... wear a button or display a bumper sticker or yard sign in support of a political cause or candidate?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... discuss political issues with your friends or family?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... encourage other people to register to vote?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... donate money to a political group or a cause?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... do volunteer or charity work in your community?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... vote in national elections?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... write a letter to the media or post your views on the internet in support of a political issue or cause?
- In the future, how likely are you to ... run for elected office in a local, state, or national government?

## POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

- Able to say what political office Richard “Dick” Cheney occupies.
- Able to say that how much of a majority (two-thirds) is required for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to override a presidential veto.
- Knows the names of two U.S. Senators from their state: two points.
- One senator: one point.
- Knows which party currently has the most Members in the House of Representatives.
- Knows which party is considered to be more conservative.
- Knows which party has a more supportive stand on affirmative action for African-Americans and other minority groups.
- Knows which party has a more pro-life position on abortion.
- Knows which party supports more regulations on business in order to protect the environment.
- Correctly answers a question on feature that would be most likely to cause a government to be called “non-democratic” (people not allowed to criticize the government).
- Correctly answers a question on how electoral votes are allocated to the states (by number of seats in Congress).
- Correctly interprets a quotation from John Locke regarding limits on governmental power.
- Correctly answers a question about the primary purpose of the Bill of Rights (to limit the power of the federal government).
- Knows which group is most likely to vote (middle-aged professionals).
- Correctly identifies the governmental unit least likely to be influenced by lobbying (The Supreme Court).
- Knows that procedures for nominating candidates for president are established by the political parties.
- Correctly identifies the definition of a PAC.
- Knows what happens to most bills introduced in the House of Representatives (they are never sent by committees to the full House).



## DEFINING CIVIC EDUCATION

What is civic education, and what does it mean to encourage civic engagement? The answers to these questions vary significantly depending on who is asked.

Research in the field of civic-related topics presents numerous challenges, but chief among them is the lack of uniformity in terminology due to myriad interpretations and understandings of how (even whether) to teach and/or participate in civic life.

Academic research and civic-related organizations specialize in a variety of areas that include charitable community volunteerism, voter-turnout, service learning, military service, citizenship training, youth mentoring and government employment, but among them there exists no standardization of teaching models, behaviors, attitudes, outcomes, or skills.

If it is possible to agree that active civic engagement requires some degree of participation in one's community, then legitimate questions arise as to how these behaviors are accurately taught, measured, and promoted.

Just as most institutions do not agree on a common definition of terms, neither do they share an approach to solving the related problems. If it is possible to agree that active civic engagement requires a degree of participation in one's community, then legitimate questions arise as to how these behaviors are accurately taught, measured, and promoted.

Tobi Walker of the Pew Charitable Trusts asks, "What are the values, skills, characteristics, and knowledge that a person needs to fulfill the rights and responsibilities of citizenship? The answers to these questions are contested and lie at the heart of the United States' democratic struggle".<sup>1</sup>

To assert that knowledge of and participation in politics is the missing link of civic education implies that there is a viable, albeit incomplete, practice of civic education in America's schools. Unfortunately, this would be an inaccurate representation not only of the overall existence of such efforts, but also of the effectiveness of the public education system in preparing young people to participate in civic life. One should not interpret the title to mean that civic education is a process left primarily to schools.

Not only is formal instruction in civic education sparse in existence, but in schools where some effort exists to connect young people with their respective communities, many of these efforts are proving insufficient at preparing young people to participate broadly in civic life. However, before treading yet again down the well-worn path in education research that heaps all blame for failure on schools, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the problem.

## ■ The Interdependent Process of Civic Education

This research found evidence that effective civic education is delivered not just through lessons at school, but within an intricate matrix of support and reinforcement, where parental involvement and formal classroom instruction serve as the foundations upon which trust and early formative political and civic participation are built. This in turn helps to develop whole communities of interest that produce active and engaged citizens at the apex. In theory, when the entire process functions effectively, the result is a culture of civic engagement and civic education nationwide.

However, it is important to note that all parts of the structure are interdependent. Therefore, when any one component is weak, it jeopardizes the strength of the entire structure. Unfortunately there is sufficient evidence that every component of the structure is weakening, and the structural integrity of the whole is suffering from prolonged neglect.

When families and schools fail to promote civic education and civic engagement, this reduces young people's trust of government and politics, discourages early participation in formative civic-related behaviors, and lowers overall interest in the community, ultimately reducing the number of active and engaged citizens.

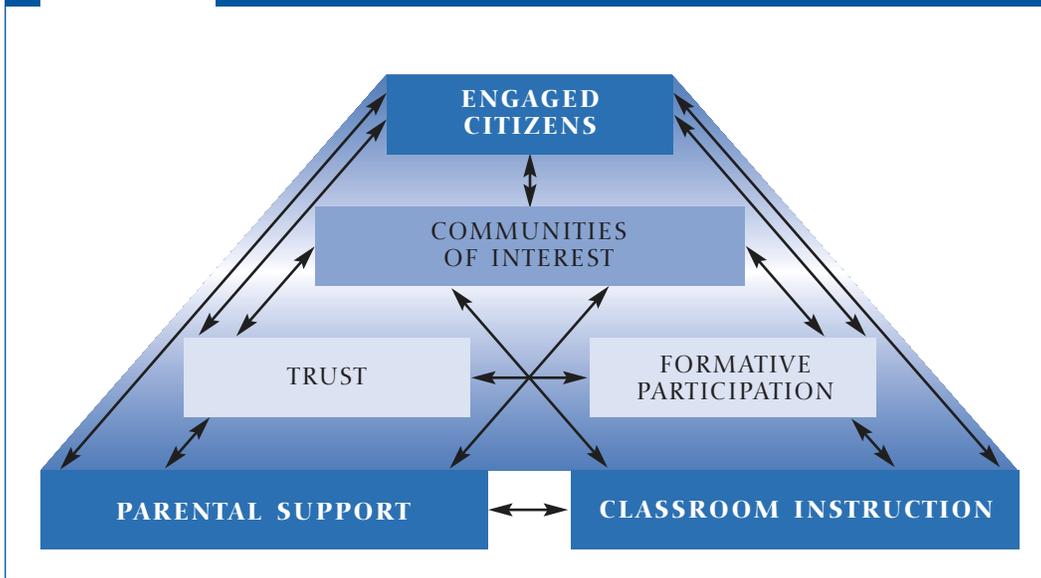
Of course this cycle neither starts nor ends with individual families or schools. Today's young people — as well as their parents — are products of a generation that distrusts politics, is disengaged, and fails to recognize and promote civic engagement as a learned social behavior.

Many researchers have found that most adults do not know the specific details of the government process, and most are unfamiliar with important policy issues and even the names of many of their public officials.<sup>2</sup> Apathy and cynicism toward government and politics are pervasive throughout society and require multifaceted solutions; anything less ignores a disengaged adult population all too content to complain about public policy, yet ignoring the next town hall or city council meeting and staying at home on Election Day.

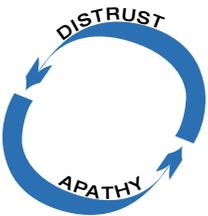
Clearly, negative societal cues reinforce the overall lack of social and political capital, but the bottom line is that America's young people are not learning civic and political engagement as responsibilities of citizenship because they are not being taught, either at home or at school, that civic and political engagement are responsibilities of citizenship.

Fortunately, most researchers agree that while there are significant problems, the damage is not yet irreversible. If America will only heed the warnings, it may avert a more serious situation later.

Clearly, negative societal cues reinforce the overall lack of social and political capital, but the bottom line is that America's young people are not learning civic and political engagement as responsibilities of citizenship.

**Figure 1****Interdependent Process of Civic Education**

When the mass problem of civic disengagement began is unclear, but today the problem is compounding significantly because of an unhealthy cycle where distrust breeds apathy, and apathy in turn breeds distrust. This destructive cycle negatively impacts a complex series of interdependent relationships at home, at school, and within communities necessary to support active civic participation. Though weak, the relationships still exist, but their continued erosion threatens to cause great and permanent damage to the nation. Today the most obvious symptom of this deterioration is expressed in the continuing decline in voter participation.



It takes a narrow view of the problem to assert that it can be solved by any one facet of society. If young people are to learn and engage in their community, they must be able to do so in a larger environment that encourages and values active citizen participation. Such an effort requires reinforcement and support not merely in the classroom, but also from individuals and institutions across every level of society.

No one would suggest this is an easy undertaking. Unfortunately, while many agree on the need, the ongoing effort for change remains with a relative few. Furthermore, in many cases, factors contributing to the problem, such as lack of trust and efficacy, have been building for decades and are not subject to quick fixes.

America must rethink its current understanding of civic education, moving away from the notion that schools alone are responsible for achieving success in civic education. To be successful, civic education must be redefined as a responsibility to be reinforced across multiple levels of society, whereby the nation collectively reestablishes a culture of civic engagement.

## ■ What Motivates a Citizen to Vote?

Two problems that further complicate the effective delivery of civic education are 1) the disconnect between voting and political participation, and 2) the tainted reputation of “politics” in the mindset of many Americans

Free and fair elections are perhaps the single greatest symbol of a self-governing society. Few would argue against including voting as a primary responsibility of citizenship and of civic education. Yet over the last forty years America has witnessed a steady decline in voter participation, and nowhere is the level of disinterest and non-participation higher than among the nation’s youngest potential voters. Since 18-year-olds were given the right to vote in 1972, turnout within the 18 to 25 age group has dropped nearly 15 percent. In the Congressional election of 1998 and Presidential election of 2000, this age group accounted for less than 8% of the total votes cast in each of these two national elections.<sup>5</sup>

Keeter et al. (2002) observed, “Fewer Baby Boomers are registered or habitually vote than the generation that came before them, and there is an even larger fall-off from Boomers to the generations that have followed them”.<sup>4</sup> If voting is an important responsibility of citizenship, as we assert, then society must do a better job of persuading Americans that the functions of government depend on this aspect of the political process.

Many well-intentioned efforts to counter the accelerating decline in voter participation have used what often amounts to little more than a turnout-for-turnout’s-sake approach. This has proven inadequate in motivating people to vote, partly because participants lack any strong sense of personal investment, reducing voting to little more than dispassionate individual participation in a poorly-defined group activity.

Compelling voters with pleas wrapped in the emotion of patriotism or a utilitarian appeal of responsibility to one’s community may yield episodic spikes in participation, but these efforts will amount to little more than surface cosmetics until America effectively addresses other more fundamental shortcomings. “Patriotism” and “civic duty” — as labels — do little to promote a more fundamental understanding that voting is the necessary foundation for the continued existence of democracy.

Though voting may be portrayed as fulfilling some patriotic duty, strictly speaking, Americans do not go to the polls to reaffirm a devotion to the flag. It is usually the case that one goes to the polls to select one’s choice of various politicians campaigning for public office. When all the tangential associations are peeled back, voting is in fact an act of participation in American politics.

Over the last forty years America has witnessed a steady decline in voter participation, and nowhere is the level of disinterest and non-participation higher than among the nation’s youngest potential voters.

The case has not been made convincingly, nor the lessons taught sufficiently, for Americans to appreciate the degree to which voting is the essence of democratic society. Elections in the United States are the product of the actions of individual voters. It may seem elementary, but without the participation of individuals, the system will collapse. Until voting is understood as a responsibility rather than just a right, one's right not to vote will continue to trump the notion of voting as a duty of citizenship.

## ■ Problems With “Politics”

Much has occurred over the last generation to poison the word “politics”. Watergate, the Vietnam War, the election debacle of 2000, and countless political scandals are only a few of the events that have fostered a culture of apathy and cynicism, causing too many people to disengage from politics and government altogether. Unfortunately, when you poison the word “politics”, you also taint much of the body that surrounds the larger process of self-government.

Promoting the importance of politics in the process of civic education does not discount the fact that the American political process can be intimidating and awkward. Furthermore, promoting the process of politics as worthwhile is not to imply that all politicians are first-rate; but such is also the case within virtually every profession. Yet most people do not use the misdeeds of a few to curtail involvement in the entire process that surrounds any other profession, while such disengagement from politics has become all too common.

Most recently, the 2000 presidential election, with its myriad problems and the high-profile, bitterly partisan battle that ensued, dealt a blow to confidence in America's political institutions. Inadequate machinery and institutional weaknesses bore a considerable portion of the blame for a presidential election-turned-circus, and few would disagree that human error on the part of election officials played a role in the embarrassingly amateur efforts to hand-count ballots. Equally troubling, though, were errors on the part of the voters themselves.<sup>5</sup> Consider the number of voters who went to the polls casting multiple votes on the same ballot for the same office, or those with little knowledge of how the voting systems worked. What is revealed are symptoms of a larger problem looming just beneath the surface — deep erosion in the civic skills necessary for American democracy to thrive.

To include politics in the broad mission of civic education is to promote a culture of civic learning and civic engagement, and to encourage the development of unbiased pedagogical methods with outcomes targeted at increasing knowledge of American politics and means of political participation, as well as the important relationship of

politics to the American system of self-government.

Although the phrase “political parties” does not appear in the U.S. Constitution, the American electoral process has evolved to the point where it is virtually impossible for a candidate to be elected outside the framework of the party structure. Indeed, most local offices and virtually all state and federal office seekers interact, associate, and/or have an affiliation with a political party. Simply stated, as the electoral process goes, interaction with politicians and political parties is unavoidable in contemporary America.

Too often, formal textbook models and community volunteer efforts of civic instruction fail to adequately place civic behaviors in the proper context of citizenship and civic responsibility to a system of self-government. If civic life includes interacting with government, and the purpose of civic education is to promote participation in civic life, then it must be understood that politics and political participation are a necessary part of civic life in America, and that civic education must be reinforced across multiple levels of society.

Of all the varied approaches to civic education — from textbook facts on foundations of government to mentoring and charitable service — we assert that a less-than-adequate number have focused comprehensively on the importance of teaching politics and political participation as a catalyst for engagement in American democracy. As this research argues, this has resulted in damaging attitudes and declining levels of trust and efficacy that threaten to derail young people’s participation as adults. Indeed, any national call to action should ensure that the civic education product being delivered in schools actually results in teaching America’s children how to participate in the democratic process of self-government.

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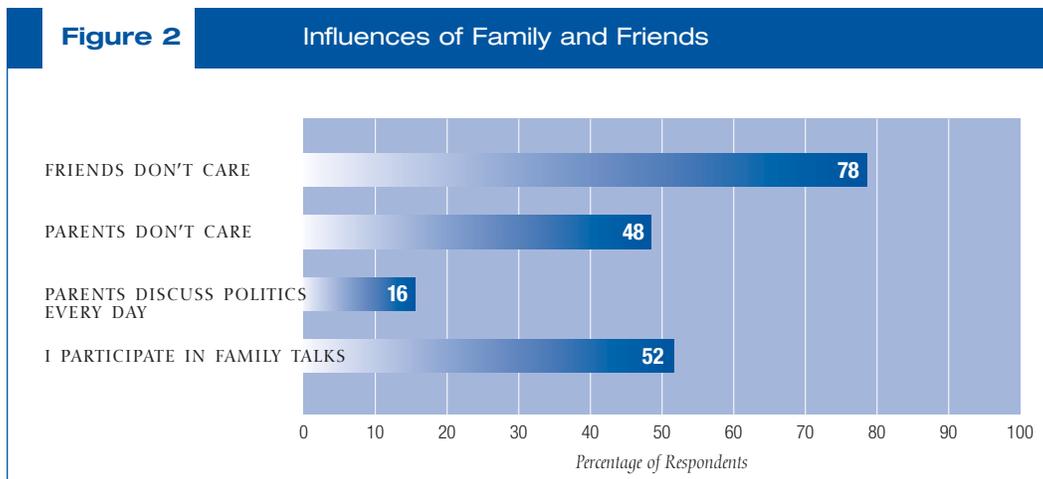
## A SNAPSHOT OF THE STUDENT RESPONDENTS

Today, American society must struggle to overcome deeply-rooted attitudes toward politics that threaten the health of our democracy. Too many people do not feel invested enough in the concept of a self-governing society to believe that they can make any meaningful impact. Unfortunately, many of these attitudes find their first expression at home very early in life via the priorities, values and virtues that parents emphasize with their children.

In 2002, in a study conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), only about half of the young people interviewed said they discussed politics and government with their parents.<sup>6</sup> Students responding to our survey disclosed similar participation levels.

Although 80 percent of students participating in our survey said their father was either very interested (29%) or somewhat interested (51%) in politics and 74 percent said their mother was either very interested (13%) or somewhat interested (61%) in politics, only 16 percent of students reported that their parents and family members engaged in discussions of politics, the country's problems or local issues every day. Another 39 percent said such discussions happened once or twice a week. Most students (91%) reported at least some level of discussion about politics with their family members, and 52% of them said they voice their own opinion "almost all the time".

But about half the students (48%) said that as far as encouraging them to be active in politics and community issues, their parents "didn't care one way or the other". Seventy-eight percent said their friends either didn't care or discouraged such involvement. (See Figure 2)



Only 10 percent of participants think it is essential to attend community meetings and local political events, while only slightly more than a third (37%) felt it was essential to follow political issues in the newspaper and on television.

Only 31% of students said they have “a great deal of interest in national politics and issues facing the nation”, while only 11% said they have “a great deal of interest in local community politics and issues facing the community”.

These numbers are particularly alarming when one considers just how intense and problematic the last few years have been for the nation. If students have not taken an interest in national politics and issues facing the nation during this time period, it is frightening to imagine what it would take to spark such an interest.

## ■ Declining Levels of Political Trust

When the foundations upon which civic education builds are weak, then it stands to reason that the overall structure is in jeopardy of collapse. Indeed, a closer inspection of the second tier of our matrix, trust and early formative civic participation, discloses troubling symptoms perpetuated by the faults in the foundation.

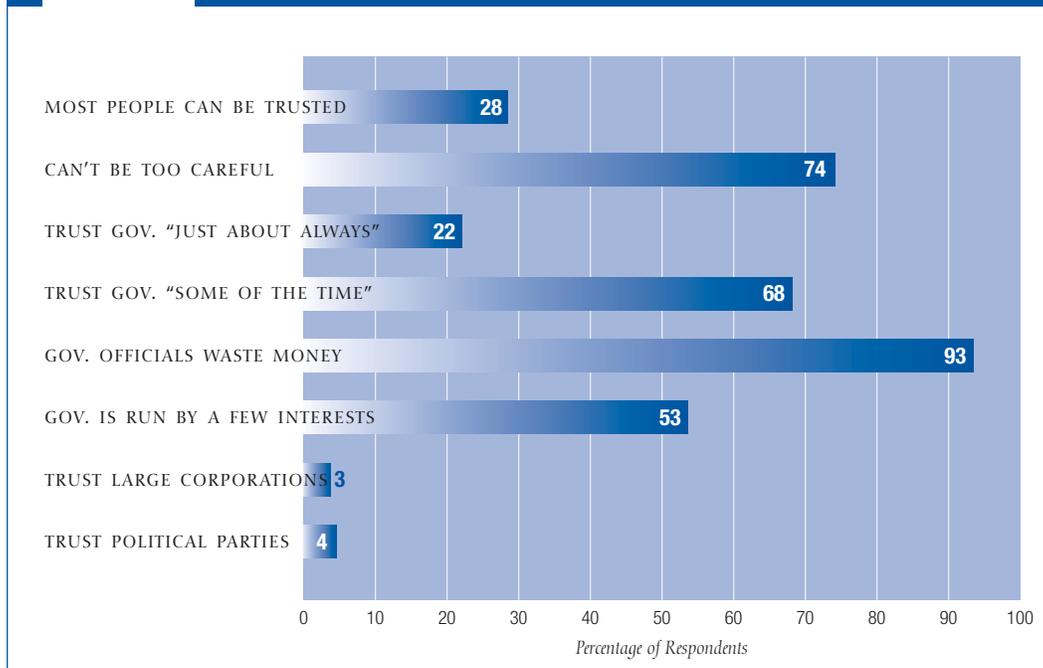
In a joint study conducted in 2003 by the Carnegie and the CIRCLE Foundations, researchers reported, “Confidence that government officials listen to ‘people like me’ has eroded over the past half-century, especially among young people (ages 18 to 25)”. The study charted confidence levels as they dropped steadily from more than 70% confidence in 1952 to about 40% in 2000.<sup>7</sup>

When asked about their level of trust in government, only 22 percent of respondents felt that government could be trusted to do what is right “just about always” and 68 percent responded that government could only be trusted “some of the time”. The same was true in our study. In general, young people participating in our research said they were not very trusting of most people. Of those who had an opinion, only 28 percent of students felt that “most people can be trusted”, while 74 percent said, “You can’t be too careful in dealing with people”.

When asked to indicate whether they thought that government officials waste money, nearly 93 percent of students felt that people in government waste taxpayer dollars. Of this number, 42 percent felt that government wastes a lot, while 51 percent felt the government wastes some money.

Only 28 percent disagreed with the statement “most politicians act unethically and are just out for themselves”. Of students expressing an opinion, 53% felt that

Of those who had an opinion, only 28 percent of students felt that “most people can be trusted.”

**Figure 3****Measures of Trust (Percentage in Agreement)**

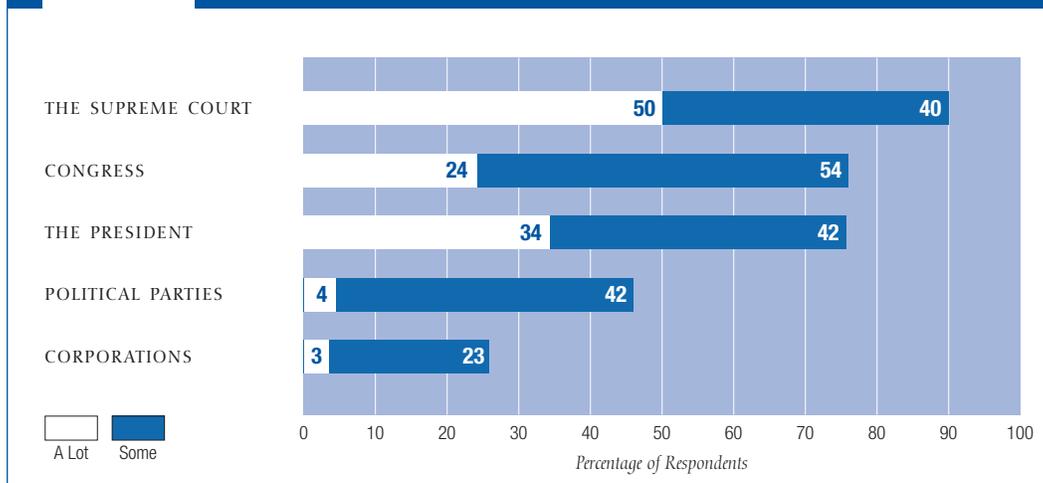
“government is run by a few interests looking out for themselves”.

Not surprisingly, following a period of highly-publicized corporate scandals in 2002, less than 3% of students in this survey said they have a lot of trust in large corporations — slightly less than the 4% of students who said they have a lot of trust in political parties. (See Figure 3)

### ■ Renewed Faith in the Institutions of Government

While the vast majority of young people are distrustful of politicians, there is some suggestion that their attitudes toward government and democratic institutions have shifted in a more positive direction following the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in 2001.

In 2002, the University of Minnesota’s Center for Democracy observed that “Overall, the terrorist attacks and the war appear to have influenced the way young adults feel — about the government, their communities, and — in theory — about their own civic and political involvement. Young adults are now more trusting of government institutions, like their older counterparts, since 9/11... however, these tragic recent events have not yet impacted young adults’ community or political behavior”.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 4****Trust of Government Institutions**

The study found that 69% of young people surveyed said they feel more favorable toward government, while 62% say they trust government to do what is right for the country following the September 11th terrorist attacks.<sup>9</sup>

Although the expressed level of general distrust for certain aspects of government and politics by students participating in our survey was high, their level of trust increased dramatically when asked about specific government institutions.

Ninety percent said they have a lot (50%) or some (40%) trust in the Supreme Court. Almost 80 percent expressed a lot (24%) or some (54%) trust in Congress, while 76 percent said they have a lot (34%) or some (42%) trust in the President. (See Figure 4)

Many of the student responses in our survey suggest that young people want to believe in American democratic institutions. More than three-quarters strongly agreed (29%) or agreed (47%) with the statement, “There is a lot about our form of government that I am proud of”. Even though 53 percent agreed that “politics and government seem so complicated that ordinary people can’t really understand what is going on”, 59 percent disagreed with the statement that “ordinary people have no say in what the government does”.

The numbers seem to reflect a level of faith in the actual institutions of government.

On the one hand, young people are distrustful of and unfamiliar with politics. On the other hand, the numbers seem to reflect a level of faith in the actual institutions of government. Perhaps it is because one can scarcely avoid the topic of government response at all levels to the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the War on Terrorism, but young people seem to recognize that while everything is not perfect with the

current system, government plays an important role in their lives.

The inconsistency of the students' attitudes toward politics and political participation versus their high levels of trust in governmental institutions only underscores the importance of teaching young people that many of the "institutions" in which they express trust are, in fact, led by political figures elected to serve in those roles by the American people during the course of a political campaign.

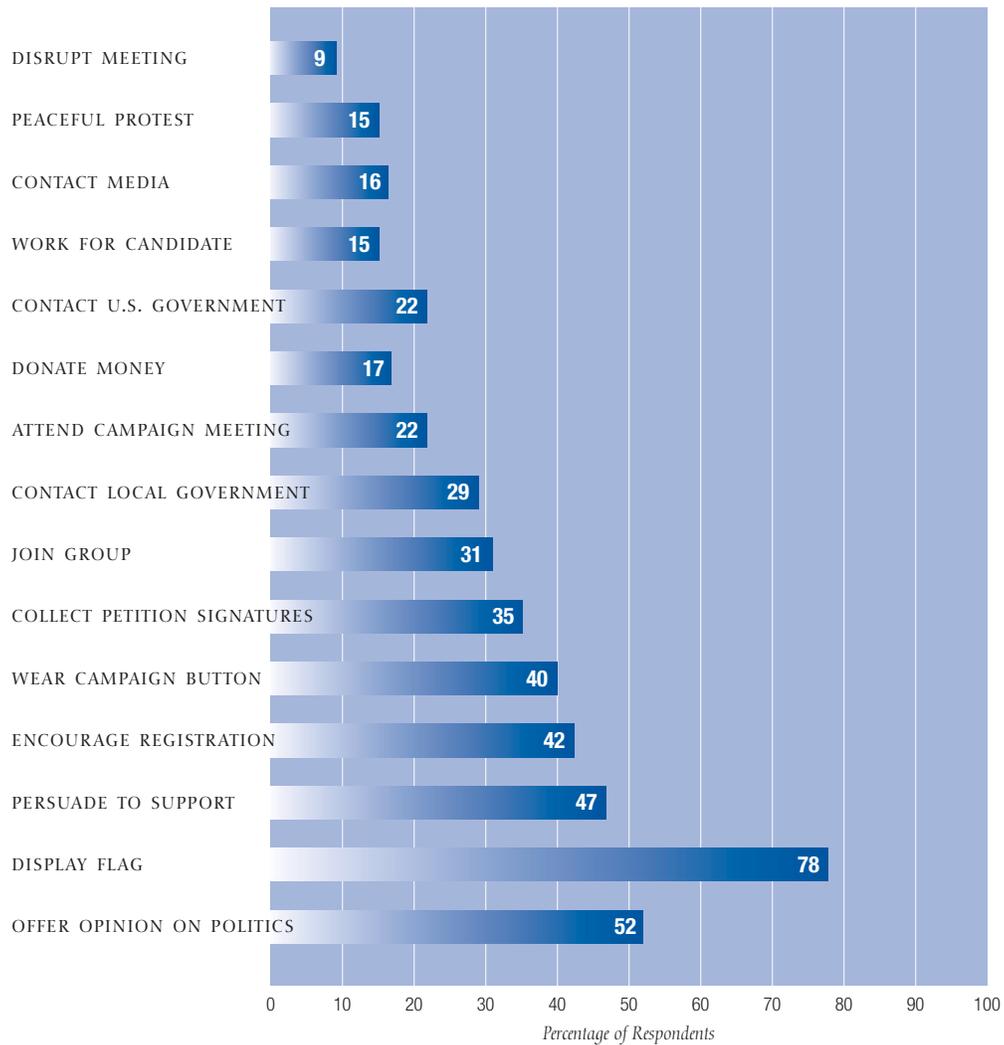
## ■ Early Formative Civic Participation Lapses

Given low trust levels, minimal engagement from parents, and lack of commitment from schools, it follows that young people would demonstrate inadequate exposure to many civic-related activities that serve to introduce them to the political arena and build a foundation for active civic engagement as adults.

This survey asked young people about a series of civic activities — most of which could be reasonably defined as responsibilities of citizenship. Despite the fact that more than half (55%) agreed with the statement "Politics is a good thing", a majority of students had not engaged in a host of formative civic activities available to them.

- 9% say they have taken part in a sit-in or disruption of government meetings.
- 15% have taken part in a peaceful protest against government policies.
- 15% reported that they had worked for a political party or candidate.
- 16% have written a letter to the media in support of a political issue or cause.
- 17% have donated money to a political group or cause.
- 22% have contacted an elected official or agency in the US government.
- 22% have attended campaign meetings or rallies.
- 29% have contacted an elected official or agency in local government.
- 31% have joined a group to solve problems in the country or in their community.
- 35% have collected signatures for a petition.
- 40% say they have worn a button, etc., in support of a political cause or a candidate.
- 42% have encouraged adults to register to vote.
- 47% have tried to persuade someone to vote for a candidate or party they supported.
- 52% regularly give their opinion during family discussions of politics.
- 78% have displayed or worn the American flag.

(See Figure 5)

**Figure 5****Level of Youth Participation in Civic Activities**

Fortunately, it appears that their lack of engagement has not yet impacted the level of importance that young people attach to the act of voting. Nearly 70 percent felt that it was essential to vote in local elections, while 62 percent felt that it was essential to vote for candidates for the U. S. Senate and the House of Representatives. More than 86 percent of students felt that it was essential to vote for President of the United States.

However, this survey also found that despite the fact that 96% of students said that as an adult they were likely to register to vote, among students who were already 18 or older, 48 percent had not yet registered.

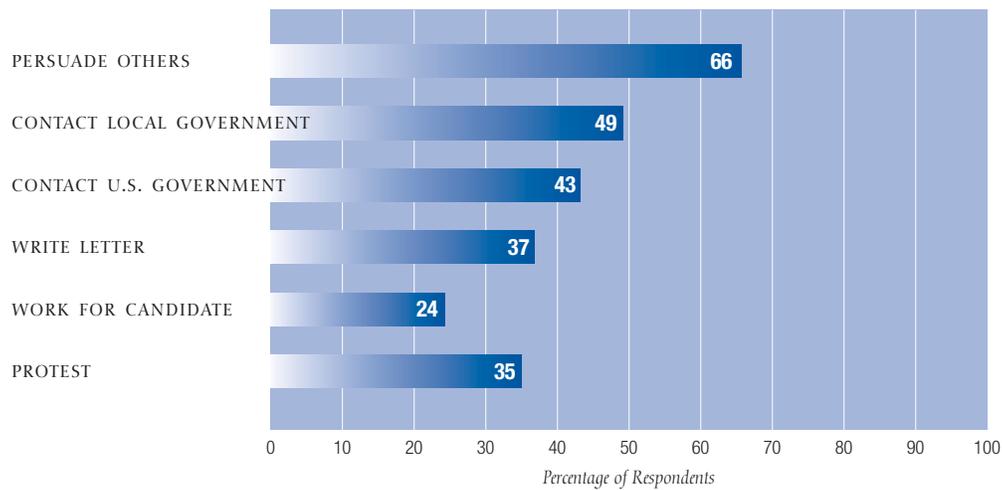
## ■ Expectations of Future Involvement

When asked how likely it is that they will participate in political activities in the future, student responses in our survey underscore an aversion to most early formative political activities that is reflective of their overall lack of exposure to the political process both at home and at school. Their responses suggest that not only are young people uninvolved now, but unless steps are quickly taken, students expect to remain uninvolved in civic activity as adults.

- 17% – run for elected office.
- 22% – take part in a sit-in or disruption of government meetings.
- 24% – work for a political party or candidate.
- 29% – attend campaign meetings or rallies.
- 35% – take part in a peaceful protest against government policies.
- 37% – write a letter to the media or post views on the Internet in support of a political issue or cause.
- 43% – contact an elected official or agency in the US government.
- 44% – join a group to solve problems in the country or in your community.
- 46% – collect signatures for a petition.
- 47% – donate money to a political group or cause.
- 49% – contact an elected official or agency in local government.
- 60% – wear a button or display a bumper sticker or yard sign in support of a political cause or a candidate.
- 66% – attempt to persuade someone else to vote for a candidate or party.
- 74% – try to encourage others to register to vote.
- 83% – display or wear the American flag.
- 90% – discuss political issues with friends or family.
- 90% – vote in a national election.
- 91% – vote in a state or local election.
- 96% – register to vote.

*(Reflects the cumulative percentage of students who responded “very likely” and “likely” to engage in each activity.)*

Perhaps it is their age that fosters a more rebellious response, but it is interesting that a higher percentage of students expect to engage in a protest against the government than to engage in other more traditional political activities, including attending campaign-related events and working for candidates for public office. (See Figure 6)

**Figure 6****Future Involvement in Political Activities**

- One-third said that it is unlikely that they will ever attempt to persuade another person to vote for a candidate for public office.
- More than half (51%) said it was unlikely that they will contact a U.S. or local government official.
- 63% said it is unlikely they will write a letter of support for a political issue or cause.
- Nearly 76% said they were either unlikely or very unlikely to ever work for a candidate for public office.

## ■ Student Knowledge

The importance of political knowledge in influencing participation in the political arena is well-established in a variety of areas including: making electoral decisions (Moon, 1990; Lanoue, 1992); as a sustainer of democratic principles (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993, 1996, 2000); assisting in the retention of political messages (Price and Zaller, 1995); to process political communications (Fiske, Lau, and Smith, 1990); as a signifier of attention paid to political issues (Zaller, 1990); as an indication of receptiveness to inter-generational interaction on political issues (Jennings, 1996); as a motivating factor for youth participation (Bennett, 1997); as a gender-specific factor in determining participation (Burns, Lehman Schlozman, and Verba, 2001).

While knowledge does not guarantee participation, clearly it is the foundation

Young people demonstrate only a moderate level of familiarity with many important details of the functions of government and the American political process.

upon which active and informed participation is based. Over the course of this research project young people demonstrated only a moderate level of familiarity with many important details of the functions of government and the American political process.

In our survey, when asked which party — Democrat or Republican — currently has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, a majority of students (91%) actually knew that the Republican Party controlled a majority. Only 19

percent incorrectly thought that the Democratic Party is considered to be more conservative than the Republican Party. Eighty-two percent could identify a characteristic that causes a government to be considered “non-democratic”, while almost 78 percent could identify the primary purpose of the Bill of Rights.

Less than a quarter (21%) did not have the skills necessary to identify which branches of government are least susceptible to being influenced by lobbying. When asked to select an answer that best describes the purpose of a political action committee (PAC), 69 percent knew that a PAC is an organization established to raise money for a candidate for public office.

However, while knowledge improved significantly from the pre-test result, still, by the conclusion of the study, only 55 percent knew that most legislative bills introduced in Congress are rejected in committee and never voted on by all members.

While most students said that as an adult they expect to vote for President, only 44 percent knew that the procedure by which a candidate is nominated to become President of the United States is established by organizations in which they had expressed virtually no trust at all — political parties.

A majority of students (72%) knew that Richard “Dick” Cheney serves as the Vice-President of the United States, but less than half (45%) could name at least one of their state’s two U.S. Senators.

## SCHOOLS: A CIVIC MISSION FORGOTTEN?

Across the nation, many schools and educators are doing an excellent job of prioritizing civic education by introducing students to their larger civic and community responsibilities using some excellent teaching practices and civic education programs. However, examples where there exist adequate levels of exposure to comprehensive civic education, as well as the necessary allocation of classroom time to the subject matter, are the exception rather than the rule.

If math, reading, science and history skills enable a person to function effectively in society, it is civic skills that sustain the presence of a self-governing society within which the person functions.

The extent to which American democracy endures, as well as the ability of the next generation of Americans to lead, depends on how well the current generation prepares them to assume these responsibilities of citizenship. As such, civic education courses should be prominent among those studied in the formative years of elementary, middle and high school. Unfortunately, public policy makers have chosen a different course for the public school system, leaving students unprepared to fulfill many important duties of citizenship.

### ■ Standards Movement Neglects Civics

In a political environment where victory hinges on voter approval, elected officials and candidates alike are drawn toward ideas that appear to resonate well with the public. As a result, they are as susceptible to whim as is pop culture. Such was the case throughout much of the 1990s in numerous statehouses across the nation on a variety of issues such as tax cuts and tougher sentencing laws for violent criminals. One of the best examples of this practice was the effort of states to mandate enhanced state-specific academic standards of learning for public schools.

Much of the rush toward enhanced standards at the state level followed on the heels of the federal government's *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, passed in 1994 by Congress to support and encourage state efforts to develop clear and rigorous standards for the material every child is expected to learn.

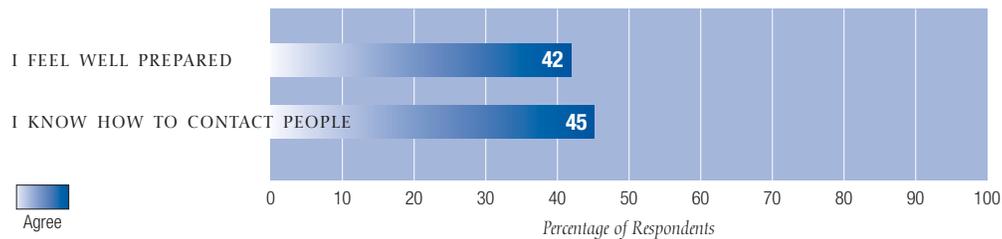
The problem with much of the *Goals 2000* legislation was not in the specific outcomes it sought to achieve, but rather that its proponents underestimated the negative reaction many state and local leaders would have toward what appeared to be

## Students' Perceived Level of Preparedness

Students participating in our research felt unprepared to actively participate in American government. When asked about their level of preparedness, 42 percent of students said they “feel well-prepared to participate in political life”, in America. Only 45 percent agreed with the statement, “If I wanted to make my political views known, I would know where and how to contact the right people”. (See Figure 7)

**Figure 7**

Students' Levels of Preparedness



mandated federal standards on a host of subjects.

After years of debate, and a clarification by the federal Department of Education that *Goals 2000* did not represent mandated federal standards, every state eventually acquiesced, if for no other reason than to receive the millions of dollars in incentives the legislation provided each state to develop and enhance its standards of learning.

Today, while many states have adopted new and more rigorous standards in a host of subjects, there remains little tangible evidence that civic education is a priority in public schools. While many federal and state policymakers, as well as many educators, agree that there is a civic mission for schools, in reality state policies and school practices often fail to provide students with a quality civic education curriculum. Fewer still devote significant attention to political involvement as a component of their civic instruction.

According to statistics gathered by the Center for Civic Education (Tolo, 1999), while all but one state have implemented K-12 content standards for civic education, only three have created their own standards devoted solely to civic education.

Furthermore, the Center found that:

- Only twenty-three states specifically require that civic education be addressed within their social studies standards.
- Twenty-nine states require students to take a government or civics course in high school, but many do so without mandated state standards outlining what students are expected to learn.
- While thirty-one states include some civics topics in statewide testing, only three states have tests dedicated to civics. Virginia is one example of a state that has adopted standards for the twelfth-grade government class but has no end-of-course measure of student proficiency.

Developing math and reading skills is, without question, essential for ensuring that students have the ability to compete and succeed not just domestically, but also in an increasingly diverse global economy. Equally important are the knowledge, skills and outcomes learned through quality civic instruction, such as: leadership; tolerance; efficacy; citizen and community interdependence; local, state and national structures of government; Constitutional principles of freedom and equality; foundational elements of democracy; political structures; public speaking; resource management and citizenship.

All these factors may explain why, during roughly the same ten-year period in which states mandated standards in reading and math, from 1988 to 1998, the number of fourth graders taking social studies fell ten percentage points nationwide, to just 39 percent.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as our research demonstrates, the lack of focus on active political participation in the civics classroom appears to be having a direct, and often negative, impact on students.

In our research, when asked to select all previous grade in which they had taken a course in civics or American government, only a small percentage of students in our survey reported having taken any such course in grades prior to their senior year:

- 20% reported taking a course in 9th grade.
- 24% reported taking a course in 10th grade.
- 37% reported taking a course in 11th grade.

*(Note: These figures are not a cumulative total, as students were instructed to select all that applied.)*

In describing the nature of these civic education classes, 91 percent of students participating in this research who said they had taken a course in civics or American government in the past reported that they had discussed current political events as part of the class, and slightly more than half (57%) said that their classes in civic education provided them with an opportunity to work on projects that addressed a community or

national issue. However, only 29 percent reported ever being required to write to an elected official as part of their courses in civic education. By the end of our study, 57 percent said they had taken courses that involved role-playing exercises and simulations such as a mock congress or mock political campaign.

Only 13 percent of participants in this survey said that civics was their “favorite subject” when asked whether they enjoyed certain courses they had taken in school.

## ■ Compelled Volunteerism

As mandated standards for civic education have declined, public schools have shown an increasing tendency toward the practice of service learning. This growing phenomenon prompted the National Association of Secretaries of State to observe that, “youth volunteerism is on the rise and is at record high levels”. Furthermore, it concluded, “Youth today are actually more involved in volunteering than their peers were a decade ago”. The report also noted that, “[youth] volunteer activities are heavily focused on social services and one-on-one interaction within their community”.<sup>11</sup>

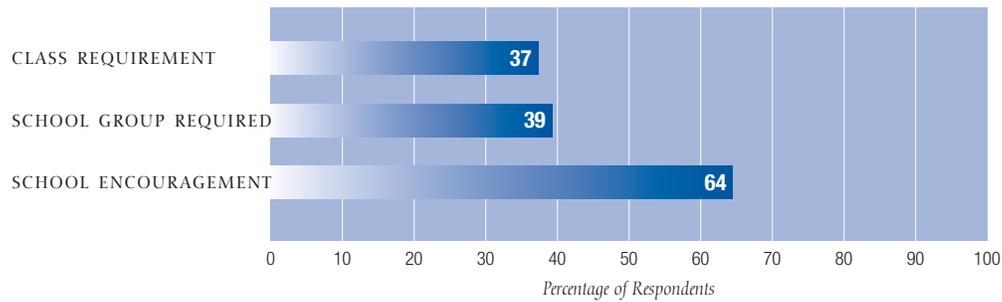
Public schools, rather than inspiring youth to volunteer by teaching them civic responsibility, have moved toward requiring community service as a component of instruction.

While the study cautioned that the nature of youth volunteerism was largely “individualistic”, it did inspire hope that this new generation of Americans would be more receptive to active participation in other aspects of civic life as well.

What the study did not show was that public schools, rather than inspiring youth to volunteer by teaching them civic responsibility, have moved toward requiring community service as a component of instruction.

In our research, more than 82 percent of students reported that they had participated in a community service activity or volunteer work in their community within the past year. In a question about future activity, 85 percent said they expect to participate in volunteer or charity work in the community as an adult.

Of the number who had already participated in volunteer activities, 64 percent said their school encouraged their volunteer activity; 39 percent said a school group required the activity, and 37 percent said their volunteer activity was required by the school or as part of a class. In a separate question asking students to indicate whether certain activities were part of any previous civic education courses they may have taken, 40 percent of students said they had performed community service and volunteer work as part of a class. (See Figure 8)

**Figure 8****Catalyst for Volunteer Activity**

According to a 2001 report from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, 64 percent of all public schools and 85 percent of public high schools offered community service as a curricular component in 1999.<sup>12</sup> A second report by the same organization in that year noted that of all students in grades six through twelve nationwide, one-fifth are in schools that require them to perform community service.<sup>13</sup> By that standard, it appears there are more schools requiring service learning and charitable community volunteerism than there are those with mandated standards for civic education.

While no cause-and-effect relationship appears to link the rise of service learning with the lack of mandated civic education standards, the question arises whether educators are substituting charitable service for civic education as a means of exposing young people to the larger civic issues of their respective communities.

Despite its somewhat Orwellian connotations, “required volunteerism” is not inherently problematic. The problem is that, more often than not, it appears that schools are failing to connect the idea of community service with the governmental infrastructure in which charitable organizations operate. Unfortunately, many educators do not seem to utilize service learning in a way that places service in the necessary context of government and other civic-related issues and institutions.

Although it is desirable and appropriate for schools to encourage charitable volunteerism, community service is not in itself a sufficient replacement for courses that teach young people how to be involved in the American democratic process



# POST-TEST SURVEY RESULTS

## ■ Improving Civic Education at Home

Our research found significant evidence that parents play an important role in fostering interest in politics and determining whether young people engage in civic activities. Specifically:

Students who said their family discusses politics, the country's problems, or local issues "every day" were far more likely to say they had a great deal of interest in national politics and issues facing the nation than those who said their family never holds such discussions (54% compared to 7%).

Likewise, those whose families held such discussions at least once or twice a week were more likely to say they have at least some interest in local community politics and issues facing the nation than those who said their family never holds such discussions, or did so less than once a month (76% versus 52%).

Students were twice as likely to say that they felt well-prepared to participate in political life in America if their parents also encouraged them to be active in politics and community issues. Of those who felt well-prepared to participate in political life, 73% came from families that discuss the country's problems or local issues at least once or twice a week when they are together.

Students were twice as likely to say that they felt well-prepared to participate in political life in America if their parents also encouraged them to be active in politics and community issues.

Students also were far less likely to be cynical and apathetic when parents encouraged them to be involved. Where there was encouragement from parents, students disagreed, by a margin of nearly three to one, that "public officials don't care what ordinary people think" and "ordinary people like me have no say in what government does".

Among students whose parents encouraged them to be involved, 53 percent agreed with the statement "government is run for the benefit of all people". In homes where there was no encouragement from family members, only 44 percent of students felt that government is run for the benefit of all people.

Students who received encouragement from their parents to be involved in politics and government were more likely than those who received no encouragement to report they had joined a group to solve problems in their community or country (40% versus 25%); more likely to have attended a campaign meeting or rally (27% versus 13%); more likely to have worked for a political party or candidate (18% versus 9%); more

likely to have contacted officials at the local or state level (33% versus 17%) and federal level (20% versus 12%); more likely to have encouraged adults to register to vote (51% versus 34%); more likely to report that they expect to register to vote as adults (98% versus 92%) and to be involved in volunteer activities in the future (94% versus 85%).

## ■ Improving Civic Education in Schools

While parental influence is important, clearly schools must also play an important role. As the only institution to reach virtually all the nations' youth, school should be at the center of efforts to teach young people how to participate in democracy. As demonstrated, far too many schools are failing to achieve the civic mission that many of their respective state constitutions so clearly outline and the *Goals 2000* legislation sought to promote. Furthermore, what is offered in the form of service learning and textbook teaching is failing to adequately introduce students to the practical and experiential skills that promote participation and functionality in civic life.

Aside from parental influence at home, schools present the best opportunity to reverse the growing negative impression that young people have of the American political process. But simply increasing the number of civic education classes is not likely to address the problems facing civic life, particularly if such classes continue to omit comprehensive units on politics, political involvement and the participatory nature of democracy.

Aside from parental influence at home, schools present the best opportunity to reverse the growing negative impression that young people have of the American political process.

This research found that students who said they had discussed current political events as part of a previous civic education class, had taken classes that required them to contact elected officials, or had a class that included role playing and simulated activities such as a mock congress were likely to show greater interest in politics and future political activities than students who had not had such experiences in a previous class.

Students who had discussed politics in class were more likely to express interest in national politics and issues facing the nation (91% versus 73%). These students were also more likely to anticipate future involvement in numerous political and community activities, including: registering to vote (96% versus 88%), attending campaign meetings and political rallies (29% versus 17%), contacting government officials or agencies in local government (50% versus 20%), contacting government officials in the U.S. government (43% versus 14%), discussing political issues with friends and family (93% versus 68%) and expressing a likelihood of voting in a national election (94% versus 75%).

Discussions of political issues in class also seemed to be related to students' level of political knowledge. In response to numerous questions measuring their knowledge of certain aspects of politics, students with past experience in classroom discussions of politics answered correctly more often than those whose previous classes had not included such discussions. Students with past experience answered correctly more often than those without such experience the following questions:

- *Which group is most likely to vote in a U. S. presidential election?* (82% of students with past experience in classroom discussions answered correctly versus 69% of students without such experience.)
- *Which of the two major parties is considered to be more conservative than the other?* (81% versus 74%)
- *Which of the two major parties has a more pro-life position on abortion?* (72% versus 62%)
- *Which of the two major parties supports more regulations on business in order to protect the environment?* (79% versus 54%)
- *Which of the two major parties has a more supportive stand on affirmative action for African-Americans and other minority groups?* (88% versus 82%)

Comparing students who said their previous classes in civic education had required them to write or contact elected political officials with those who said their previous classes had not required them to do so, students who had written or contacted politicians were more likely to say they expect to contact officials in the U.S. government in the future (57% versus 35%) and make contact in the future with local politicians (66% versus 42%). Students required to contact elected officials were also more likely to say they were interested in national political issues (93% versus 88%) and local political issues (74% versus 68%).

Students who said their previous classes in civic education had included role-playing opportunities such as a mock congress or political campaign were somewhat, though not dramatically, more apt to say they were "very likely" to engage in certain community and political activities in the future, including: registering to vote (81% versus 74%), voting in a state or local election (69% versus 59%), and joining a group to solve the country's or the community's problems (17% versus 10%).

Students who said they were members of a school group that deals with politics or political issues were more likely than non-members to say they have a great deal of interest in issues that affect the nation (41% versus 22%) and locality (18% versus 9%). They were more likely to have attended campaign meetings

Students who said they were members of a school group that deals with politics or political issues were more likely than non-members to say they have a great deal of interest in issues that affect the nation and locality.

**Table 1** Significant Positive Effects of YLI

	Mock Election	Mock Election/ Lesson Plans	Democracy Corps	E-Congress
<b>X:</b> indicates a significant positive effect of YLI <b>(X):</b> indicates a significant negative effect of the YLI program at the .05 level.				
Interest in Media			X	
Political Efficacy	X	X	X	X
Responsibilities of Citizens in a Democracy				
Trust			X	
Pride in Politics	X	X	X	X
Political Participation				
Future Participation			X	
Political Knowledge	X	X	X	X

(32% versus 16%), worked for a political candidate (23% versus 10%), contacted elected officials in the U.S. government (25% versus 13%), contacted local elected officials (40% versus 21%), persuaded someone to vote for a candidate they support (63% versus 44%), and encouraged adults to register to vote (56% versus 38%).

They were also more likely than non-members to view certain political activities as essential including: voting in local elections (77% versus 69%), voting for candidates for U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives (72% versus 63), voting for candidates for President of the United States (92% versus 85%), and following political news in the newspaper (42% versus 32%).

### ■ Multivariate Analyses

The following findings resulted from post-test data for those students whose classrooms participated in the evaluation study in both autumn and spring. Students were surveyed at the beginning of the school year to gain baseline data to be compared to the data gained from surveying students at the end of the school year. For each YLI component, students in classrooms where the teacher indicated YLI usage are compared to students in classrooms where no YLI materials were used. These comparisons included assessments of interest in political news and the media, political efficacy, responsibilities of citizens in a democracy, trust in institutions, pride in politics (that is,

## Comparison of Pre- and Post-treatment Groups with Control Groups

A More Perfect Union	A More Perfect Union Lesson Plan	E-Congress Lesson Plan	Campaigns Lesson Plan	Fundamentals of Gov't Lesson Plan	Any YLI Involvement
X			X	X	X
X		X	X	X	X
X	X	X	X	X	X

positive appreciation of the political process), political participation, plans for future political participation, and political knowledge. The findings, displayed in Table 1 and Table 2, are summarized below.

Across different components of YLI, excluding the use of the “A More Perfect Union” CD and the corresponding lesson plans, students in the YLI group reported higher political efficacy, more pride in politics and a higher level of political knowledge than those in civics classes that did not use YLI’s materials. The “Campaigns” lesson plans also had other positive effects, such as increased interest in media and an increased sense of the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy. Interestingly, the most intense and prolonged exposure to political participation was offered through the Democracy Corps program and course units and the “Fundamentals of Government” lesson plans. Among those who utilized YLI, these two facets produced the most significant positive effects influencing trust and political efficacy, respectively.

In addition to examining a composite measure of future participation, each component participation item was examined in a similar fashion. Because the YLI program may differentially influence the many types of future participation, a more detailed analysis is warranted. As expected, the components of YLI have differential effects on different behavior in future political participation.

Students in the YLI group reported higher political efficacy, more pride in politics and a higher level of political knowledge than those in civics classes that did not use YLI’s materials.

**Table 2**

**Summary of Results for Teachers' Flags for Pre-test/Post-test Groups**

	Mock Election	Mock Election/ Lesson Plans	Democracy Corps	E-Congress
<b>X:</b> indicates a significant positive effect of YLI <b>(X):</b> indicates a significant negative effect of the YLI program at the .05 level.				
Register to vote		X		
Vote in local or state elections				
Join a group to solve problems	X	X	X	
Attend campaign meetings	X	X	X	
Attend protests		X		
Wear American flag				
Sit-in or disruption of government meetings				
Work for political party			X	
Contact elected local official or agency		X	X	
Contact elected US official or agency		X	X	
Collect names for a petition				
Persuade voters		X		
Wear a button				
Discuss political issue with family/friends				
Encourage others to vote			X	
Donate money				
Volunteer in community		X	X	
Vote in national election		X		
Write letter to media				
Run for elected office				

Students in classes where teachers utilized the political participation exercises and lesson plans of the mock election reported a higher propensity to participate actively in politics in the future. These activities include: registering to vote, joining a group to solve a problem, attending campaign meetings, persuading others to vote for a candidate or party that the student supports, contacting local or national level officials, volunteering in the community, and voting in a national election. Democracy Corps and Campaign lesson plans yielded similar results, but the e-Congress and “A More Perfect Union” had

A More Perfect Union	A More Perfect Union Lesson Plan	E-Congress Lesson Plan	Campaigns Lesson Plan	Fundamentals of Gov't Lesson Plan	Any YLI Involvement
			X	X	X
			X		X
		X	X	(X)	
(X)			X		
					X
			X		

no observable effect on future political participation plans.

The research design for our study included additional groups of students who were tested in the spring only and were not given the “pre-test” questionnaire to fill out in the autumn. Comparing results for these “post-only” test groups with those who received both tests can help to clarify the apparent effects of the YLI program seen in the pre-test/post-test groups. We cannot assume that all of the observed effects heretofore presented are the result of the YLI program. Including post-test only students who

**Table 3** Effects of YLI Among All Post-test Groups

	Mock Election	Mock Election/ Lesson Plans	Democracy Corps	E-Congress
<b>X:</b> indicates a significant positive effect of YLI <b>(X):</b> indicates a significant negative effect of the YLI program at the .05 level.				
Interest in Media			X	
Political Efficacy				
Responsibilities of Citizens in a Democracy				
Trust			X	
Pride in Politics	X	X	X	X
Political Participation *				
Future Participation		X		
Political Knowledge	X	X	X	X

\* Detailed in Table 4

have not been exposed to the survey at a prior time allows for an examination of “sensitization” effects. It allows for the assessment and adjustment of effects that may have resulted from prior exposure to the survey. Students retested in the spring may be mentally “keyed in” to those questions asked in the autumn and may thereby be affected by not only the YLI program but also the act of taking the survey at a prior time.<sup>14</sup>

An additional source of the observed effects that could confound analysis would lie in unintentional differences in selection of classrooms in the YLI and non-YLI groups.

An additional source of observed effects that could confound analysis would lie in unintentional differences in the selection of classrooms in the YLI and non-YLI groups. These selection effects, and differences in the student groups engaged in YLI activities versus those that are not, could produce apparent YLI effects that are not due to the program. The selection processes that could affect the composition of our comparison groups involve the various steps used by the research team in selecting and recruiting schools to participate in the study, plus the further self-selection involved in the voluntary choice of YLI teachers to use or not use each specific program offered by YLI — decisions that were not under the control of the research team. The best way to adjust statistically for possible selection effects is to take advantage of our pre-test measures on the variables of interest. By focusing on the degree to which students *changed* in their political orientations and knowledge over the course of the year, rather than the overall levels they possessed in the spring, we

A More Perfect Union	A More Perfect Union Lesson Plan	E-Congress Lesson Plan	Campaigns Lesson Plan	Fundamentals of Gov't Lesson Plan	Any YLI Involvement
(X)	(X) (X)	X	X	X X	X
		X	X	X	X

control for any initial differences that may have existed between the students exposed to YLI programs and those not receiving them.

By examining all groups in the pre-test and post-test phases, we gain a better understanding of the actual program effects. The results suggest that some of the observed effect of the program may be due to sensitization (see Table 3).

When examining all students taking the post-test (the spring survey), students in YLI classes reported more pride in politics and political knowledge across different components of YLI. However, the positive effect of YLI on political efficacy was attenuated, suggesting there may be some type of sensitization or selection effects on the groups which were administered the pre-test measure. Democracy Corps still has positive effects on interest in media and trust when the non-pre-test groups are taken into account.

The results for individual future political participation measures were also examined for all post-test groups. Again, when the non-pre-test groups are included in the comparison, many of the effects were weakened due to what are apparently sensitizing effects of the groups were given the pre-test measure. Students in classes whose teachers implemented the mock election reported a higher likelihood to participate actively in politics in the future. Students in classes whose teachers used “A More Perfect Union”

When examining all students taking the post-test (the spring survey), students in YLI classes reported more pride in politics and political knowledge across different components of YLI.

**Table 4** Effects of YLI Using Pre-test/Post-test Groups Only

	Mock Election	Mock Election/ Lesson Plans	Democracy Corps	E-Congress
<p>X: indicates a significant positive effect of YLI                      (X): indicates a significant negative effect of the YLI program at the .05 level.</p>				
Register to vote				
Vote in local or state elections				
Join a group to solve problems	X			
Attend campaign meetings	X			
Attend protests	X			
Wear American flag				
Sit-in or disruption of government meetings				
Work for political party				
Contact elected local official or agency				
Contact elected US official or agency				
Collect names for a petition				
Persuade voters	X	X		
Wear a button				
Discuss political issue with family/friends	X			
Encourage others to vote	X			
Donate money				
Volunteer in community				
Vote in national election				
Write letter to media				
Run for elected office				

reported less likelihood to vote in a local or state election, collect petition signatures, or vote in a national election as well as write letters to media or post their views.

To eliminate possible biases from selection effects, we have conducted an analysis of actual change in the key variables between the autumn and spring administrations of the questionnaire to students in the pre-test/post-test groups. (See Table 5)

Notable among these results is the absence of significant effects of the YLI program on the measures of pride in politics. Comparison of Table 5 with Table 1 suggests that

A More Perfect Union	A More Perfect Union Lesson Plan	E-Congress Lesson Plan	Campaigns Lesson Plan	Fundamentals of Gov't Lesson Plan	Any YLI Involvement
(X)				X	
(X)	(X)				(X)
(X)				X	X
(X)					

the classes that chose to use YLI materials may have included students who already had higher levels of appreciation for the political process than those that used no YLI materials in their civic classes. In contrast, the effects of YLI on students' political efficacy cannot be ascribed to selection effects, and the positive effects of YLI on political knowledge hold up in the analysis of change as well.

We have also conducted more elaborate analyses in which other potentially confounding variables are controlled. For example, we have examined the effects of

**Table 5**

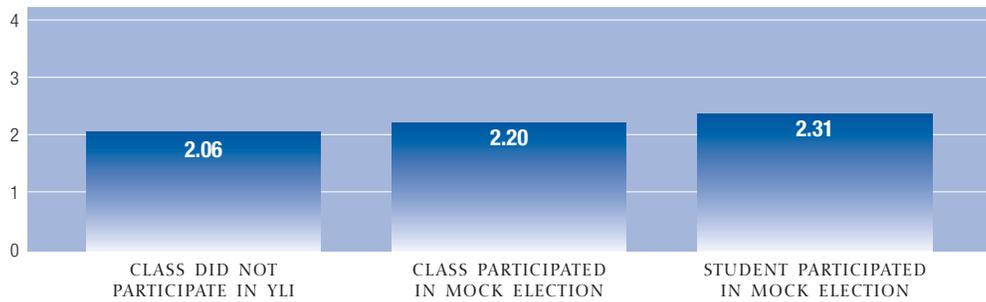
**Summary of Results for Teachers' Flags — Test of Change**

	Mock Election	Mock Election/ Lesson Plans	Democracy Corps	E-Congress
Interest in Media			X	
Political Efficacy	X	X	X	
Responsibilities of Citizens in a Democracy				
Trust				
Pride in Politics				
Political Participation				
Future Participation				
Political Knowledge	X			X

\* Note "X" indicates a significant positive effect of YLI, whereas "(X)" indicates a significant negative effect of the YLI program at the .05 level.

**Figure 9**

**Political Efficacy by Participation in Mock Election**



**Figure 10**

**Pride in Politics by Participation in Mock Election**



Youth Leadership Initiative 2003

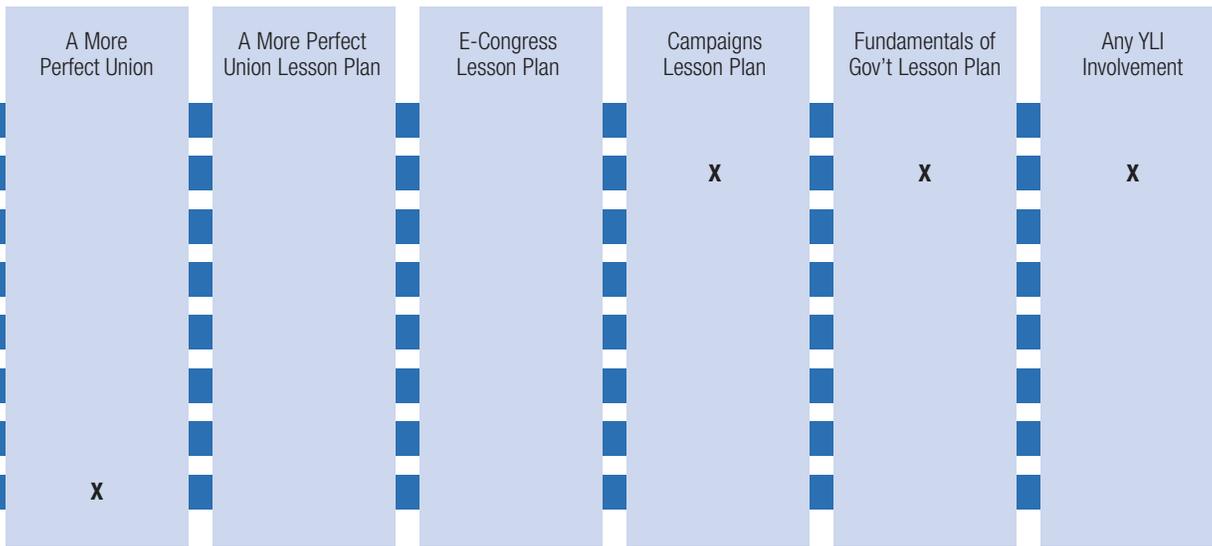


Figure 11

Political Participation by Participation in Mock Election

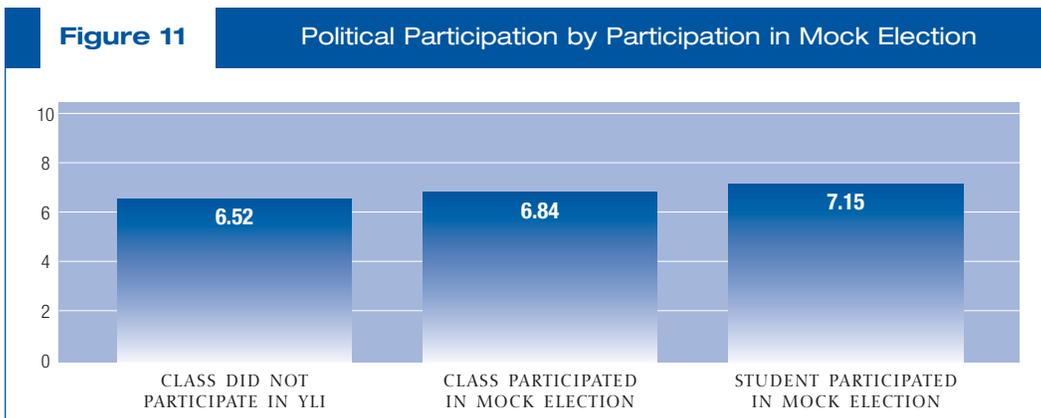
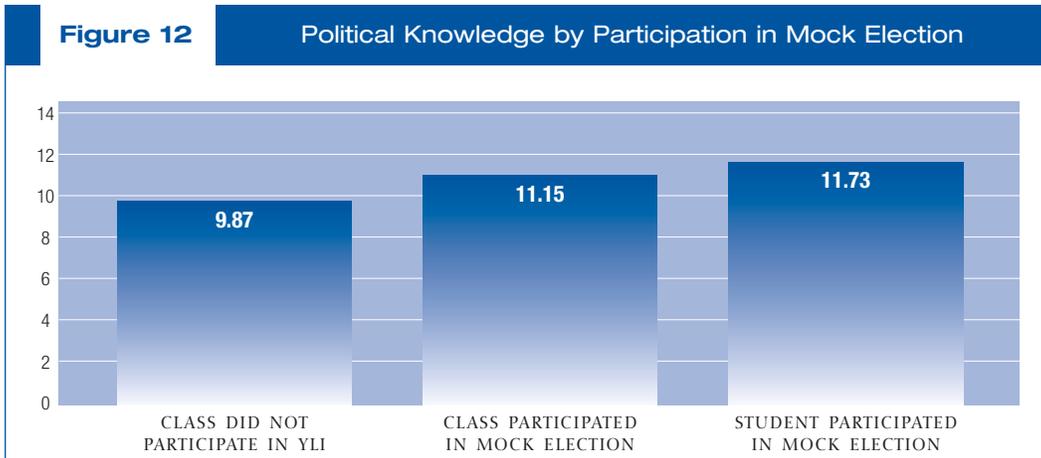


Figure 12

Political Knowledge by Participation in Mock Election



YLI with gender of the student and students' grade level statistically controlled, using multivariate statistical modeling methods. These models produced results that are essentially similar in pattern to those reported above, with only a few specific effects becoming non-significant when these controls are introduced.

In summary, we can say with confidence that the YLI programs have substantial, positive effects on students' level of political knowledge.

In summary, we can say with confidence that the YLI programs have substantial, positive effects on students' level of political knowledge. These effects hold up under statistical tests designed to eliminate possible effects of sensitization or selection, which are potential confounding factors in any quasi-experimental evaluation design. We have some evidence that the YLI programs have positive effects on students' political efficacy, pride in politics, and propensity for future political participation, but these effects are not seen as consistently across the various statistical tests that are possible in this complex study design. Note that all these results involve whole classes of students, whose teachers either did or did not offer the YLI programs. They do not take into account whether individual students did or did not become actively involved in the class activity that was offered.

## ■ Effects of Exposure to Political Participation

The following results indicate that the more exposure students have to the political participation exercises involved in the mock election aspects of the YLI program, the more likely they were to show increased positive outcome. As Figure 9 shows, students whose classes participated in the mock election were more likely to agree with statements that reflected political efficacy (an average of 2.20 items out of 5 on the index) than were students whose classes did not participate in this program (an average of 2.06). Moreover, there was a larger increase in the measurement of efficacy for students who actively participated in the mock election (an average of 2.31 items). Similar results were found with respect to measures of students' pride in politics, political participation and knowledge. These are presented in Figures 10-12.

Students in classes that participated in the mock election were on average more likely to agree with statements such as "Politics is a good thing" or "There is a lot about our form of government that I am proud of" (an average of 5.75 versus 3.45 items out of 7) than were students in classes that did not participate in the program. They also engaged in more political activities (averaging 6.84 activities out of 17 versus only 6.52) and performed better on political knowledge questions (scoring an average 11.15 out of 17 questions versus 9.87). Furthermore, the general improvement in observed attitudes

and behavior for students whose classes participated in the mock election (compared to those whose classes did not) is even more evident for those students who actively participated in the mock election.

Taken together, these significant differences related to individual student involvement in the class activity are further testimony to the efficacy of the YLI formula, which expressly includes political learning and actively involves students in interactive learning processes. Adoption of YLI by the teacher brings enhanced learning to the class, and those students who go ‘hands-on’ with the YLI learning experiences are strengthened in key areas that are predictive of future political participation and civic involvement.

## ■ YLI Evaluation Conclusions

These initial results provide support for the effectiveness of YLI for a number of civic outcomes, especially pride in politics and political knowledge. While the post-test data for all groups suggests that some initial effects seen in the pre-test/post-test groups may be attenuated when controlling for sensitization and selection effects, a number of significant findings remain. In addition, the results concerning the level of exposure and participation in the mock election portion of the program indicate that greater involvement in this aspect of YLI results in enhanced positive impact of the program. Additional analyses are underway to more thoroughly examine the intricacies of the data and the positive effects of the political participation exercises of the YLI program on student civic outcomes. These findings are encouraging, suggesting a number of positive outcomes resulting from different components of the YLI program. These provide the basis for more complex and ongoing multivariate analyses that take full advantage of the study design.

These findings are encouraging, suggesting a number of positive outcomes resulting from different components of the YLI program.



# CONCLUSION

## Building a Culture of Civic Education

In his 1936 acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, Franklin D. Roosevelt said of the American people, “There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny”.<sup>15</sup>

While much has changed since then, many of the circumstances that confronted Roosevelt’s generation, namely, war and economic uncertainty, once again affect a new generation of Americans. The troubling question that the nation should ask now is whether, during the intervening years, today’s generation has been adequately prepared to meet the civic responsibilities of active engagement in a democratic society. Most indicators suggest the answer is not a favorable one.

For the small segment of the population that actively engages in civic and political life, it is an anathema that apathy and cynicism toward government and politics have exemplified the prevailing attitude of American society for decades. Unfortunately, over time, the failings of one generation have become the reality of the next, and a quagmire has developed that is steadily eroding trust and participation in politics and government. But it would be patently unfair and inaccurate to suggest that young people are to blame for their lack of interest.

The extent to which young people fail to engage in civic life is a direct reflection of the values and priorities of the society of which they are a part. The apathy of today’s generation toward politics is a symptom of society’s neglect of civic education.

In a country as large as the United States, it is all too easy for residents of one state to feel disconnected from their fellow citizens in another state. It is thus understandable that issues involving a federal government confined mainly to Washington, D.C., would seem distant and irrelevant for most Americans. Furthermore, although the American system of government is built on citizen participation, politics and government are not known as the most welcoming and user-friendly institutions. These and other circumstances combine to give the appearance that the problem of civic disengagement is virtually insurmountable. Without question, it will not be solved overnight.

The troubling question that the nation should ask now is whether ... today’s generation has been adequately prepared to meet the civic responsibilities of active engagement in a democratic society.

Because of myriad influences, our attitudes and values related to politics and political participation are among the most difficult variables to change. The best we should expect is incremental change over a period of years. But there are steps that can be immediately initiated to begin the important process of building a society committed to civic education and civic engagement. As suggested, the first steps must begin at home and at school. From there, the effort extends outward to include federal, state, and local elected officials, as well as institutions such as the business community, colleges and universities, the media and volunteer groups.

There is a Chinese proverb that states, “One generation plants the trees under which another takes its ease”.<sup>16</sup> If the generation to whom Roosevelt spoke at the Democratic National Convention in 1956 planted the proverbial seeds of unprecedented civic engagement, then the baby boom generation that followed was all too willing to lose sight of the effort required to maintain and foster such engagement long-term.

For all its shortcomings and imperfections, the American system of government remains a model for democracy and freedom. But as the nation witnessed in 2001, what seems a bastion of strength one day can be destroyed the next, if it is not guarded carefully.

Sadly, where civic education is concerned, evidence suggests that America is rapidly losing its “planters” altogether. Over the last four decades far too many citizens have been content to “take their ease”, allowing civic engagement to steadily fade from the priorities of American life.

Not since Roosevelt’s generation has the world faced a greater international threat than it does today. There could not have been a more sobering example of the fragility of societal institutions than the frightening sight on September 11th of two hundred-story buildings rocked from their foundations, cascading to the ground. The attacks forced conscientious people to realize just how much about society and the nation is taken for granted — that things once regarded as solid, permanent, and unwavering are in fact only as strong as the effort society puts into building and protecting them.

The same may be said of democracy.

For all its shortcomings and imperfections, the American system of government remains a model for democracy and freedom. But as the nation witnessed in 2001, what seems a bastion of strength one day can be destroyed the next, if it is not guarded carefully.

As America begins a new century, every citizen committed to strengthening democratic principles must renew his or her pledge to responsible civic education — fostering a nationwide commitment to ensuring that Americans are taught and encouraged to become actively engaged in civic life. To do anything less jeopardizes the foundations of a free and self-governing society.

Markus Prior said it best in his 2002 study, *Political Knowledge after September 11*: “Politics gets undivided attention when things go horribly and perceptibly wrong. Little things that go wrong and accumulate over time do not trigger the same threat perception, but may well be equally damaging. If our threat monitors and self-interest detectors routinely fail to notice the small disasters, saying that they worked when the big crisis came does not prove that our democracy is in good health.”<sup>17</sup>

If democracy and the process of self-government are to endure and thrive, American society must reorient itself to the value and importance of civic education and engagement. To do so requires a shift from passive, even indifferent, observation of politics and government to active participation in the democratic institutions that shape the future of this republic.

There are many ways to undermine a system of government. Terrorism is only one means. The National Association of Secretaries of State warned, “nobody can say for sure how long a country can remain truly democratic when it lives off of its political and social capital, but the prospect of a democracy without citizens is a sobering oxymoron.”<sup>18</sup>

How troubling it would be to someday find that while we protected America well from outside threats, it was our own internal neglect of the health of our democracy that resulted in the nation’s demise.

## ■ TAKE ACTION

### What Parents Can Do

To develop a national effort to rebuild civic education, parents should consider the following recommendations:

- Facilitate discussions of political and community issues during times when the family is together. If parents feel uncomfortable or too unfamiliar with issues to facilitate such discussions, they may consider introducing current issues and political discussions by encouraging children to read newspapers and news magazines or view news programs on television or the Internet.
- Insist on quality civic instruction at school. Visit the school to learn whether and to what extent students are required to take civic education courses. Where the standards are inadequate, request that the schools consider enhancing their curriculum.
- Encourage children to explore the many opportunities that exist for participation in civic-related community and political events and organizations.
- Vote. Discuss the importance of voting with children and underscore the lesson by taking children to the polls on Election Day.

## What Schools Can Do: Don't Tell Me, Show Me

### *Teaching Politics and Political Engagement*

The American form of government is unique in that its survival and perpetuity rely on the active participation of its citizens. Unlike other forms of government where continuity is ensured through various outside factors, the United States' form of government — at nearly every level — depends on its citizens to select representatives to carry on the mission of government. If the citizens fail in that responsibility, there simply is no alternative selection method. Politics is the process by which American citizens engage in such selection. To teach political participation effectively, the data herein suggests that the message from students is: "Don't tell me. Show me".

Contrary to conventional wisdom of the last decade, Niemi and Junn (1998) found that, when appropriately designed, "civics course work and other elements of the school environment do influence high school students' civic knowledge".<sup>19</sup>

Textbook facts and charitable volunteerism are essential to a well-rounded concept of citizenship, but research has not shown that these teaching models, when offered alone, result in greater civic engagement.

While textbook knowledge is an important basis for active political participation, there is evidence in a number of national youth surveys, as well as in the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, that civic and government courses that actively engage students in their communities, government and the political process improve the likelihood that students will be involved in a variety of civic activities, including voting, when they are adults.<sup>20</sup> Textbook facts and charitable volunteerism are essential to a well-rounded concept of citizenship, but research has not shown that these teaching models, when offered alone, result in greater civic engagement.

According to Cawelti and Shaver (1999), civics courses that focus only on the mechanical and institutional components of government are not as effective at fostering adult engagement as those that actively engage students in the current issues of their community and at all levels of government.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to take advantage of the potential that early formative civic engagement opportunities present for teaching the importance of voting and civic engagement later in life. As teaching political engagement goes, the lesson from our research seems to be: Don't tell me, show me.

No doubt, many people — parents chief among them — would oppose the idea of teaching partisan politics in the public school system, and for good reason. It is unacceptable to engage in teaching practices that reflect or seek to impose a particular bias or political ideology on young people. Quality civic instruction would seek just the opposite.

Even though the word “politics” is often perceived negatively, politics is the engine that drives government. It is therefore important to expose young people to the political process, political leaders, and political issues. Only through knowledge and active participation can students alter what they perceive as negative about politics.

To include politics in the broad mission of civic education is to develop pedagogical methods with outcomes targeted at increasing knowledge of American politics and its important relation to a system of self-government. A more comprehensive approach to civic instruction with an emphasis on political participation would:

- Foster a synergy between the formal study of politics and government and the application of civic knowledge to practical aspects of everyday civic life.
- Introduce, through experiential learning, the intricacies of the political and policymaking process, as well as local community issues to illustrate the importance of the process of politics.
- Facilitate discussion of difficult — even controversial — current issues to introduce young people to the vast array of opinions that collectively make up a free and democratic society.
- Restructure service learning to connect charity with politics. Four factors suggest an opening in current service learning practices that would enable a much stronger connection to government and politics: 1) the lack of current connection between service learning programs and American politics and government; 2) the current growing national infrastructure for service in public schools; 3) favorable attitudes toward service among school administrators; and 4) evidence of a desire on the part of young people to participate in such programs.

As a matter of practice, current service learning projects would continue, but the design could be enhanced by identifying and facilitating connections to government and politics, as was the case with schools using the resources of the Democracy Corps in this research. Connecting service projects with government and political organizations that focus on the same subject would not impede the “individualistic” nature of students’ attitudes toward service. Volunteerism would serve as a means of not only employing but enhancing existing social and political capital.

The solution need not be overly complex. There is virtually no area of service where a connection to government and politics could not be established. Consider a few examples:

A volunteer at homeless shelters, soup kitchens and food banks should also be required as part of the service learning project to make connections with, among others, the United States Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service or the

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Department of Health and Human Service's Bureau of Primary Health Care. Through these and other government agencies, students would learn how to collaborate with community health organizations and social service agencies to deliver food and quality care to the homeless, as well as develop and improve programs that provide meals to people in nursing homes and day care centers.

Students with an interest in helping the environment could be introduced to the Environmental Protection Agency and its numerous branches, such as the Office of Air and Radiation, where they could learn about programs to improve air quality and control pollution. Through the National Park Service they would learn to protect forests and manage wildlife and natural habitats.

Coordinating local blood and bone marrow drives, visiting nursing homes, or volunteering at local HIV/AIDS clinics also have an abundance of connections to government and politics, including the federal Administration on Aging, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the Center for Disease Control's Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention.

Students interested in traveling to less-developed countries as a component of their service would find assistance and could learn more about governmental involvement through the United Nations or the federal government's Agency for International Development or the Foreign Agricultural Service.

Following the example of certain YLI aspects in this research, exposure to politics could also be enhanced by incorporating research of and contact with candidates for local, state and federal office to determine candidates' positions on issues related to the student's particular service interest.

### **What Federal, State and Locally Elected Officials Can Do**

There is perhaps no group of individuals who have greater power to influence civic life than those persons elected to hold federal and state offices. The best opportunity to cultivate long-term interest in civic life is to include such material in school curricula. There simply is no excuse or reason for the lack of mandated standards for civic education in America.

The all-important first step to set the stage for enhanced civic instruction nationwide is for elected officials to back their rhetoric with education policies and funding that supports civic education. A teacher can be highly motivated, but if he or she lacks the necessary resources to keep young people engaged in the subject matter throughout the school year, interest will fade and students will not learn the spectrum of responsibilities that accompany citizenship.

When young people participating in this research were asked to identify those people who have encouraged them to be active in politics and community issues, civics teachers emerged over parents as the individuals who have provided the greatest level of encouragement. Seventy-six percent of students reported that it was their civics teacher who encouraged them (though not always successfully) to be active in politics and community issues.

A quality civic education system recognizes that teachers are the key to its successful administration and implementation. Teachers must be supported through in-service training and professional development programs that provide them with the tools needed to implement such programs. In addition, the federal government should provide additional funds for programs and organizations that develop teaching resources geared toward the field of civic education.

Following the examples of the *Goals 2000* legislation, the federal government should develop a system of incentives for the individual states specifically aimed at encouraging the development of mandated standards in civic education with end-of-course exams to ensure accountability.

Because of the bureaucratic structure of the educational hierarchy in America, many local government officials see little or no role in the process of encouraging civic engagement and civic education. In most localities, local officials lack any significant jurisdiction over matters of mandated curriculum standards. Given that, many excuse themselves of responsibility over the matter entirely. However, like all other elected and/or appointed government officials, local government officials should make civic education and civic engagement a priority by creating and encouraging opportunities for enhanced citizen involvement at the local level and by calling on state and federal officials to promote civic education and civic engagement.

To establish civic engagement as a priority in American life, there are additional steps that elected officials can take to help curtail the decline in civic education, including:

- Offering, encouraging, and publicizing volunteer opportunities within their campaigns, as well as within the structure of the public offices that they hold.
- Establishing citizen boards and commissions; visiting local schools and communities.
- Facilitating opportunities for people to gather to discuss politics and government.
- Conducting town hall meetings and offering other opportunities during the campaign season for the public to attend debates, and, when possible, submitting debate questions via the Internet; creating more opportunities for youth participation (introducers, debate questioners, campaign volunteers) at campaign events.

- Advancing public policies that promote civic engagement by all Americans through legislative measures that rebuild public confidence in government and provide opportunities for enhanced civic engagement.

### **What the Media Can Do**

- Devote significant blocks during primetime to broadcast ballot returns in all elections, not just during presidential election years.
- Publicize and broadcast civic-engagement opportunities within local communities.
- Spotlight individuals and organizations working to promote civic education and renew civic engagement.
- Allocate additional space to letters to the editor, guest editorials, and news stories highlighting civic-engagement opportunities; develop community and volunteer spotlight segments on the evening news.
- Recognize educators who are promoting civic education and civic engagement.

### **What Colleges and Universities Can Do**

Given that K-12 civic education teachers receive their training at colleges and universities, opportunities abound to reinforce the importance of politics and political participation as a component of civic instruction. This vital role in enhancing civic education nationwide can be achieved by:

- Introducing civic education as a priority of the social studies classroom.
- Emphasizing the importance of politics and other aspects of civic life during pre-service and in-service teaching education programs.
- Encouraging a greater focus on civic education training by offering to existing classroom teachers continuing education credits that are based in civic education.
- Exploring and utilizing the varied resources of civic-related organizations to underscore the broad range of opportunities available for teaching participation in American democracy.

Obviously, additional research is necessary to better understand the many factors that influence and promote political engagement. However, as additional research is conducted it should offer practical solutions that can be applied at the primary delivery points for civic education.

### **What Private Enterprise Can Do**

- Encourage civic engagement among the workforce.
- Provide support to research and community organizations that promote civic education and civic engagement through financial contributions and service opportunities for employees.
- Encourage employees to vote, and offer flex-time or comp-time opportunities as an incentive to volunteer for civic and political organizations.

### **What Volunteer Organizations Can Do**

To assist in combating the problem of civic disengagement, volunteer organizations should take several steps to introduce volunteers to the larger community of which the organization is a part, and to explain how government and politics affect the organization. Volunteer organizations can encourage civic engagement and promote civics education by linking volunteerism with other facets of civic life in America by:

- Making connections with the government and politics. Encourage volunteers to understand issues affecting the organization and to participate in the electoral process to promote these issues.
- Providing volunteers with information on the organization's funding sources, particularly if the organization is supported in whole or in part by public funds.
- Creating opportunities for volunteers to participate in lobbying activities and other public meetings with the political community.
- Cross-referencing similar community and governmental organizations in literature to provide volunteers with a better understanding of how the organization fits into the larger community.
- Encouraging volunteers to contact their elected officials to discuss the goals of the organization and support for funding.
- Engaging volunteers in any opportunities to discuss the organization with elected officials and other community leaders and organizations.

## ENDNOTES

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- 7 *The Civic Mission of Schools*, released February 12, 2002, by CIRCLE, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, p. 12, quoting various studies, including Vaughn L. Grisham, *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community*, Dayton, OH, Kettering Foundation, 1999.
- 8 *Short Term Impacts, Long Term Opportunities*. The Center for Democracy and Citizenship, University of Minnesota Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, Minneapolis, p. 6. Available at [www.youngcitizensurvey.org/cover.htm](http://www.youngcitizensurvey.org/cover.htm).
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- 20 See the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment, and the 1999 assessment by the International Association for the Evaluation of Education (IEA). The IEA was compiled in 1999, analyzing the responses of nearly 100,000 high school students in 28 countries. For analysis of the IEA data, see Judith Torney-Purta, 2002. "The Schools' Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-eight Countries," *Applied Developmental Science*, vol. 6, no. 4.
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