

## RESEARCH ROUNDUP

tions, at least locally, leading all but the most cynical to the conclusion that the government is responsive. By contrast, in areas lacking partisan diversity, many young people conclude that their political efforts would have no value, generating low efficacy among a sizeable bloc of such potential voters. It is no great surprise that efficacy levels were low in our inner-city neighborhoods. Local elections in these communities are settled so far in advance that they do not stimulate much of a sense that an individual's voice counts."

Poverty and other resource constraints in inner-city neighborhoods are clearly detrimental to the political learning process, but economic resources are not everything. Rural areas and some older suburbs in the study were just as impoverished, but the students in suburbs and small towns usually had much higher efficacy and knowledge levels. This is attributable to community characteristics, principally a more competitive political setting in which participation was more highly valued.

### Schools Play an Important Role

While diversity in a community contributes to the political socialization process, the relationship that students form with school authorities cannot be ignored. Curriculum matters, but students will also judge the fairness of the "system" in reaction to how they are treated by teachers and school administrators. As for curriculum content, schools can help young people develop positive opinions about the political process by providing civics instruction that focuses on the inevitable role of conflict in democratic politics.

According to the authors, "The difference between the youth that like government-related coursework and those who do not lies in how the two groups understand political disagreement." Schools that teach young people that conflict and disagreement are a nat-

ural part of politics help them develop positive attitudes about politically-related subject matter. The book concludes with nearly an entire chapter of concrete recommendations for enhancing civics education and curriculum and promoting political diversity and activism at the local level.

### CHALLENGES FOR NATIONAL SERVICE

The President's call for more Americans to engage in national service through programs such as the USA Freedom Corps brings new attention to a long history of voluntary service programs in America. Since the New Deal, Americans have participated in a variety of civilian national service programs. A CIRCLE Working Paper by Melissa Bass traces the development of the three most prominent civilian national service programs—AmeriCorps, VISTA, and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)—and gives reasons why to date national service in the United States has not been recognized and supported as a viable policy option for addressing the nation's needs and a viable life-option for significant numbers of young adults. For a copy of "CIRCLE Working Paper 11 National Service in America: Policy (Dis) Connections Over Time" visit CIRCLE's Web site [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).

### Challenges to Institutionalizing National Service

After ten years of existence, the most recently created national service program, AmeriCorps, is facing many of the same challenges to secure stable funding as its predecessor programs VISTA and the CCC. According to Ms. Bass, "In the U.S., domestic civilian national service has been difficult to create and even harder to maintain and expand. While all three programs have faced similar obstacles, none have been deeply institutionalized, nor have they built on one another."

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## CIRCLE FACT SHEETS

*CIRCLE has produced a number of Fact Sheets which are brief documents with basic information and graphs on various topics. The following new Fact Sheets can be found on CIRCLE's Web site:*

- ≡ **Young People and Online Political Campaigning** (January 2004) provides a snapshot of the types of online campaign techniques young people use and which they say would make them more likely to vote for a candidate.
- ≡ **Volunteering Among Young People** (Updated January 2004) has been updated with the latest data on youth volunteering rates.
- ≡ **Civics Curriculum and Civics Skills: Recent Evidence** (November 2003) explores whether civics education classes in schools actually increase students' civic skills and civic knowledge.

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By looking back at these earlier programs, the author identifies challenges that must be taken into consideration to ensure the sustainability of today's national service programs. Oddly enough, one of the hurdles national service programs must overcome stems from the strong presidential support that national service programs have enjoyed. The author notes, "Neither the CCC nor AmeriCorps would have been created without its respective president; AmeriCorps wouldn't have survived without it. However, the personal presidential investment that allows national service programs to exist at all makes them a convenient target for presidential opponents who want to make a point."

In several cases, national service programs faced battles for survival that had nothing to do with the programs' successes or failures, but instead with political fights between Congress and the President. For example, the CCC was denied permanence in 1937 by the Democrats as a way of punishing FDR. In 1995, AmeriCorps faced a similar predicament when House Republicans voted to take away AmeriCorps funding to embarrass President Clinton.

Other challenges national service programs have faced are: difficulties in gaining bipartisan support, a lack of natural interest group allies, and a constantly shifting definition of what constitutes national service. ■

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## CIRCLE

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on Civic Learning & Engagement

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