

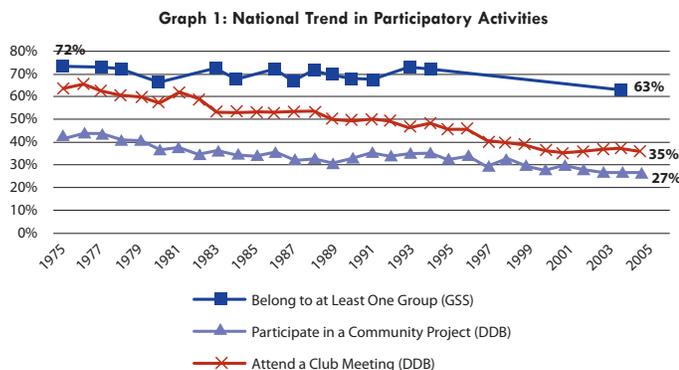
## FEDERAL POLICY AND CIVIC SKILLS

Citizens can improve their communities, their government, and the nation through active civic engagement and collaboration. To do so requires skills, notes the new CIRCLE fact sheet entitled "Civic Skills and Federal Policy." The fact sheet adds that educational programs and other government-supported initiatives have been shown to enhance Americans' civic skills and their levels of engagement. But these programs and other opportunities are scarce and unequal, and are often provided to people who are already the most likely to be engaged. A lack of civic learning opportunities not only inhibits Americans' civic participation, but also has harmful consequences for their academic and economic progress.

The fact sheet was publicly released in concurrence with a conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on April 29, 2010, where seventy-five scholars, civic leaders, and federal officials from the United States Department of Education, the Corporation for National and Community Service, Department of Interior, Department of Justice, Environmental Protection Agency, and the Federal Transit Administration met to develop a federal policy agenda for civic skills. The conference was convened by CIRCLE and was co-sponsored by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS) and Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy (SOND). In collaboration with the participants, CIRCLE will draft and publish a report presenting federal policy recommendations discussed at the meeting.

## TRENDS SHOW DECLINE IN NATIONAL CIVIC PARTICIPATION

As described in the fact sheet, the closest that surveys come to measuring civic skills is to measure the frequency of civic activities – activities which generally require skills. For instance, participation in groups both strengthens and requires skills. Americans, however, have become less likely to attend meetings, work on projects and belong to groups since the 1970s.



Source: GSS (General social survey), DDB (DDB Needham lifestyles surveys)

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THE RESEARCH ROUNDUP COLUMN HIGHLIGHTS RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS COMMISSIONED OR GENERATED BY CIRCLE. ALSO INCLUDED IS AN UPDATE ON NEW CIRCLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS FACT SHEETS, RESEARCH ARTICLES, RESEARCH ABSTRACTS, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, AND DATASETS.

New CIRCLE analysis, using various national and federal datasets, shows that this declining trend in participation may be due to declining and unequal opportunities to gain civic skills in various settings, such as K-12 schools, higher education, home, communities and neighborhoods.

## GAP IN ENGAGEMENT CAUSED BY LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES, NOT LACK OF MOTIVATION

Both adolescents and adults have unequal opportunities to develop civic skills. In addition to the aforementioned settings, people of all ages can learn and practice skills in the workplace, churches and religious congregations, and voluntary organizations. CIRCLE's analysis focuses primarily on opportunities through home and K-12 education.

**Civic skills built at home, through parental influence.** CIRCLE's research shows that the levels of household income and parental educational attainment predict whether there is political discussion among family members and peers and other access to information (*Civic and Political Health Survey*, 2006). According to CIRCLE analysis of the *Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS)*, 10<sup>th</sup> graders from a lower socioeconomic background are less likely to have access to a daily newspaper at home and discuss current events with their parents.

CIRCLE RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THE LEVELS OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND PARENTAL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT PREDICT WHETHER THERE IS POLITICAL DISCUSSION AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS AND PEERS AND OTHER ACCESS TO INFORMATION (*CIVIC AND POLITICAL HEALTH SURVEY*, 2006).

**Children with fewer home civic opportunities receive unequal civic learning opportunities through their schools.**<sup>1</sup> A study by Kahne and Middaugh<sup>2</sup> (2008) shows that schools located in affluent areas were more likely to offer service-learning than lower-income area schools. This gap could imply that higher SES youth are more likely to be exposed to peers who perform service, which

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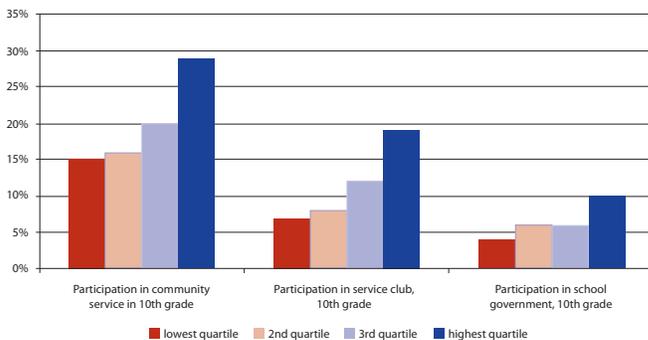
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could be another venue for higher SES youth to be involved. A person's racial/ethnic background and immigrant status have shown to be relevant in predicting civic learning opportunities; non-Hispanic white youth and US born youth have shown higher levels of opportunity and participation compared to their Hispanic and/or immigrant counterparts.

**DATA SUGGEST THAT YOUNG PEOPLE OF ALL BACKGROUNDS ARE MOTIVATED TO ACT CIVICALLY. YOUTH FROM LOWER SES BACKGROUNDS, WHO HAVE FEWER OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE, ARE MOTIVATED TO WORK ON CIVIC ISSUES.**

**Graph 2: Socioeconomic Status and HS Civic Opportunities (ELS 2002;2004)**



Source: Education Longitudinal Study 2002;2004

Data suggest that young people of all backgrounds are motivated to act civically. Youth from lower SES backgrounds, who have fewer opportunities to participate, are motivated to work on civic issues. For example, data from the *Educational Longitudinal Study* (ELS) show that young people from lower socioeconomic quartiles are more likely to think that being an active citizen by supporting environmental or social justice causes is “very important.”

**STUDENTS WITH CIVIC LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES MORE LIKELY TO FOLLOW A POSITIVE ACADEMIC TRAJECTORY**

CIRCLE analysis of the ELS data shows that the opportunity to participate in community service through school also has academic benefits. Students who participate in community service

as 10<sup>th</sup> graders are more likely to have stayed in school by 12<sup>th</sup> grade and to have taken college entrance exams compared to those who did not participate. Furthermore, Davila and Mora (2007) indicate that “civic activities undertaken during high school are related to significantly higher odds that individuals graduate from college in later years, when controlling for a host of socio-economic and demographic characteristics.”

The fact sheet can be found at <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=375>. ★

**ENDNOTES**

- 1 Civic learning opportunities are defined as opportunities provided by the school to participate in student government, service clubs, newspaper/yearbook or community service.
- 2 Kahne, J. & Middaugh, E. (2008) “Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School.” (CIRCLE Working Paper No. 59). Medford, MA: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.
- 3 Davila, A. & Mora, M.T. (2007) “Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress: An Analysis using NELS Data” (CIRCLE Working Paper No. 52). Medford, MA: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

