

THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIC CULTURE: COMPARING MIAMI AND MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL

The following two articles highlight reports on the civic health of several states and two cities. These reports were a joint effort between the National Conference on Citizenship, local nonprofit organizations, and CIRCLE.

On January 24, 2011, the National Conference on Citizenship, The Florida Joint Center for Citizenship, and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College in Minneapolis released a major new report entitled *Tale of Two Cities: Civic Health in Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul*. CIRCLE contributed to the research, and CIRCLE staff members Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Peter Levine were co-authors. The full report is available from the National Conference on Citizenship at www.ncoc.net/TwoCitiesCHI.

DATA SHOW STARKLY DIFFERENT CIVIC CULTURES IN MIAMI AND MINNEAPOLIS

Miami is the least civically engaged major city in the country and Minneapolis-St. Paul is the most engaged, according to measures included in the annual Census Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS provides data on volunteering, voting, membership in voluntary groups and associations, exchanging favors with neighbors, use of the news media, discussion of current events, and everyday forms of sociability, such as entertaining friends. Miami and Minneapolis-St. Paul have markedly different demographics, but those differences do not explain the civic engagement gap. In both communities (as elsewhere in the United States), people with more education and income tend to engage more in civic affairs. But individuals in Minneapolis-St. Paul who are in the lowest income group are more likely to volunteer, attend public meetings, work with neighbors, participate in politics outside of elections, and participate in associations than are people in the wealthiest tier in Miami. An individual with a high school education in Minneapolis-St. Paul is about as likely to be engaged as an individual with a college education in Miami. The report argues that the civic gap between Minneapolis-St. Paul and Miami reflects divergent attitudes toward citizenship and public work that permeate these metropolitan areas' institutions (public, nonprofit, and private) and that cause them to use different strategies and practices on a daily basis.

The report argues that the civic culture of Minneapolis-St. Paul is oriented toward enlisting diverse people—paid employees as well as volunteers—in a common project of shaping the area's future without abandoning their own cultural backgrounds and

values. Those norms are less evident in the Miami area, which appears to be more balkanized and less reliant on citizens to create a common future.

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CREATING CULTURAL SHIFTS TOWARD ENGAGEMENT

The CPS does not measure everything. It is not designed to tell us about the content of civic experiences: what people do when they volunteer or join groups. Nor does it reveal their values, motivations, and goals. Finally, it measures only unpaid, voluntary acts, from voting to volunteering. People can also be active citizens as part of their paid work. For example, the Minneapolis Police Department has won awards for community policing, an example of civic engagement that is woven into professional practices. In the report, Harry Boyte, co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, provides a historical and interpretive portrait of civic culture in the Twin Cities that should inspire similar strategies everywhere.

“It is important to understand [the] underlying factors that contribute to the vitality of a civic culture of engagement,” said Bob Graham, former U. S. Senator, Florida Governor, and life-long Miami resident. “While Miami’s unique demographics do not fully explain its low level of civic engagement, the combination of rapid growth and extraordinary diversity define a social, economic, and political context within which citizens and community leaders must find a way to create a culture of engagement. Over the next generation, America will look more like Miami than Minneapolis, and the challenge of empowerment in the face of change and diversity that Miami faces today will be echoed in communities across the nation. The lessons learned here will have important implications for the future.” ★

