FIVE STRATEGIES TO REVIVE CIVIC COMMUNICATION

Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communication, is a new policy paper by CIRCLE Director, Peter Levine. It was released on June 10, 2011 in Chicago at a high-level roundtable discussion. The report calls on community and elected leaders to adopt sensible strategies to strengthen civic communication and citizen engagement. The paper was commissioned by the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. It is the sixth in a series of white papers aimed at implementing the recommendations of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy.

The strategies posed in the report include reforming existing federal, state and local programs and institutions that could make significant contributions to the information environment and health of local communities through a Civic Information Corps; engaging young people in building the information and communication capacity of their communities; realigning incentives in higher education to turn these institutions into local information hubs; investing in public deliberations; and mapping the civic networks that exist in communities.

USING TECHNOLOGY AND EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE TO REBUILD THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Information by itself is inert. It begins to have value for a democracy when citizens turn it into knowledge and use it for public purposes. Unless citizens interpret, evaluate, and discuss the vast supply of data—everything from government spending to global temperatures—information cannot lead to civic action, let alone *wise* civic action.

ONE THING IS CLEAR: WE MUST REBUILD OUR PUBLIC SPHERE WITH NEW MATERIALS, AS OUR PREDECESSORS HAVE DONE SEVERAL TIMES IN THE PAST.

To create and use knowledge, individuals must be organized. Formerly, many Americans were recruited to join a civil society of voluntary membership associations, newspapers, and face-to-face meetings that provided them with information, encouraged them to discuss and debate, and taught them skills of analysis, communication, and political or civic action. That traditional civil society is in deep decline.

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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.

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Today, different institutions have the resources and motives to perform civic functions. There are also new tools and technologies available that may help, although it remains to be seen whether the new communications media are adequate to the task of civic renewal. One thing is clear: we must rebuild our public sphere with new materials, as our predecessors have done several times in the past.

STRATEGIES FOR REVIVING CIVIC COMMUNICATION

CIRCLE's report, *Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communications*, provides the following recommendations for reviving civic communication.

Strategy 1: Create a Civic Information Corps using the nation's "service" infrastructure to generate knowledge. Take advantage of the large and growing infrastructure of national and community service programs by requiring all service participants to learn civic communications skills and by creating a new Civic Information Corps—mainly young people who will use digital media to create and disseminate knowledge and information and connect people and associations.

Strategy 2: Engage universities as community information hubs. Take advantage of the nation's vast higher education sector by changing policies and incentives so that colleges and universities create forums for public deliberation and produce information that is relevant, coherent, and accessible to their local communities.

Strategy 3: Invest in face-to-face public deliberation. Take advantage of the growing practice of community-wide deliberative summits to strengthen democracy at the municipal level by offering training, physical spaces, and neutral conveners and by passing local laws that require public officials to pay attention to the results of these summits.

Strategy 4: Generate public "relational" knowledge. Take advantage of new tools for mapping networks and relationships to make transparent the structures of our communities and to allow everyone to have the kind of relational knowledge traditionally monopolized by professional organizers.

Strategy 5: Civic engagement for public information knowledge. Take advantage of the diverse organizations concerned with civic communications to build an advocacy network that debates and defends public information and knowledge.

The paper concludes with a list of specific recommendations for action by a variety of institutions and by citizens themselves. The following institutions are called upon, with a brief description of the actions they can take to help revive the civic communications sphere and foster a more productive, more democratic culture of civic engagement.

• The Corporation for National and Community Service, with congressional authorization and appropriations, should create a Civic Information Corps that provides training, grants and meetings for service organizations that emphasize the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The Corporation should also include the development of civic communications skills in desired learning outcomes for its programs. Congress should fund the Corporation for National and Community Service to do this work.

CITIZENS SHOULD SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO CREATE AND SHARE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE AND DISCUSS PUBLIC ISSUES; EXPECT THEIR GOVERNMENTS TO BE OPEN, TRANSPARENT AND COLLABORATIVE; VOLUNTEER TO THE BEST OF THEIR ABILITY; AND CREATE AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE NETWORKS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

• Federal agencies that fund research and scholarship (National Institutes of Health, National Sciences Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts) should fund and evaluate scholarship that benefits local communities as well as efforts to aggregate and disseminate such research. Agencies that address community-level problems, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency, should support community-wide public deliberations about those problems through a mix of grants, training and technical assistance.

• State and local governments should provide physical spaces for public deliberations. Local governments should fund and/or promote online knowledge hubs in partnership with other local institutions. They should also convene deliberative forums and support ongoing training for deliberative democracy.

• School systems should make civic education a priority and include within the curriculum media and communications skills and service learning opportunities that involve media.

• Colleges and universities should reward research and engagement that are helpful to their immediate geographical communities and make such research easily accessible to the public. They should make civic learning opportunities available to non-students. Journalism schools and departments in particular should play leading roles in creating and maintaining public information portals and related resources. Programs in library and information sciences should help design, maintain and evaluate public online archives, networks and relationship maps.

• Foundations should support pilot projects to build civic communications infrastructure and skills. Special attention should be given to funding community-based nonprofits that serve marginalized populations, including non-college attending youth and young adults. Foundations can also fund processes such as public deliberations at the local level.

• Citizens should seek opportunities to create and share public knowledge and discuss public issues; expect their governments to be open, transparent and collaborative; volunteer to the best of their ability; and create and share knowledge about the networks and relationships in their communities. ★

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NEW CENSUS DATA CONFIRM AFRICAN AMERICAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH INCREASED THEIR TURNOUT RATES IN 2010 MIDTERMS

YOUTH TURNOUT OVERALL SIMILAR TO PAST MIDTERM ELECTIONS

An estimated 24% of young people (ages 18-29) voted in the 2010 midterm elections, according to newly released Census data analyzed by CIRCLE. While turnout declined slightly between 2006 and 2010, youth turnout remained similar to past midterm elections and tracks a similar decline in adult turnout.

Graph 1: Voter Turnout by Age, 1974-2010
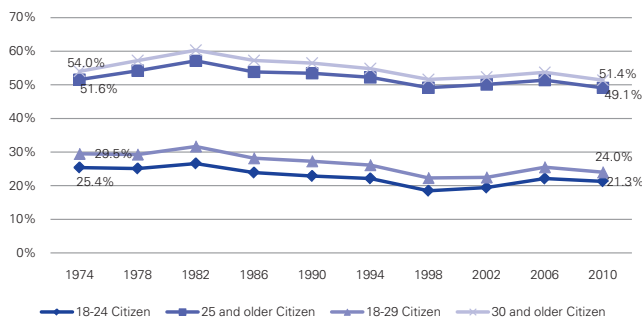
Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplements 1974-2010

"Youth turnout has stayed between 22% and 25% in all midterm elections since 1998, compared to an average of 30% in the 1970s and 1980s. We have to find a way to raise it," said CIRCLE Director, Peter Levine.

PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICANS STILL STRONG IN 2010

In 2010, as in 2008, young African Americans led the way in youth voter turnout. Young African Americans voted at a rate of 27.5% compared to 24.9% of young Whites, 17.6% of young Latinos and 17.7% of young Asian Americans.   White youth experienced the largest decline in voter turnout, dropping from 28.0% in 2006 to 24.9% in 2010.

Graph 2: 18-to-29 Year-Old Citizen Turnout, by Race 1974-2010
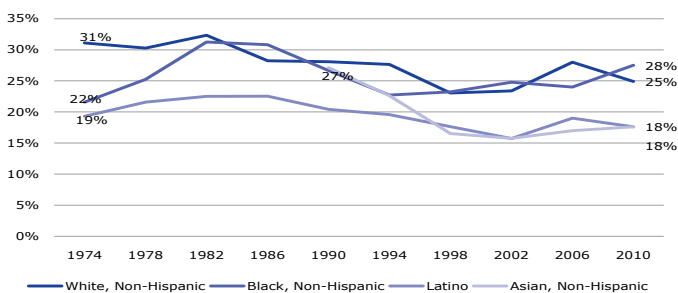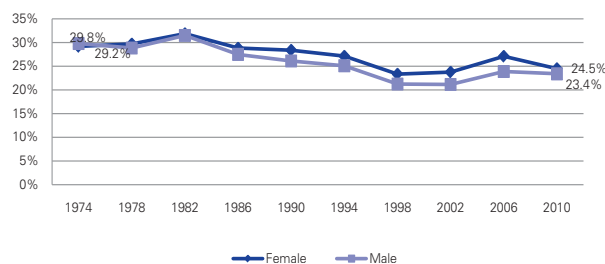

Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplements 1974-2010

VOTER TURNOUT AMONG YOUNG FEMALES DECLINES SLIGHTLY

The report also found a closing gender gap in turnout. In 2008, an eight point voter turnout gap existed between young men and women (54.9% of young females voted compared to 47.2% of young men). In 2010, the gap shrunk to just slightly over one percentage point.

Graph 3: Voter Turnout among 18-to-29 year-olds, by Gender, 1974-2010

Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplements 1974-2010

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH MORE EDUCATION ARE MORE LIKELY TO VOTE

As in past elections, young people with at least some college experience voted at twice the rate as their counterparts without college experience (14.2% vs. 30.8%).[1] One's educational level has long been understood to be a strong predictive factor of one's likelihood of voting. More-educated individuals—those who have had at least some college education—have consistently been almost twice as likely to vote as those who have received no more than a high school diploma. Despite the fact that college attendance has grown since 1972, the turnout gap between these two groups has remained relatively constant (see Table 1).

MORE-EDUCATED INDIVIDUALS—THOSE WHO HAVE HAD AT LEAST SOME COLLEGE EDUCATION—HAVE CONSISTENTLY BEEN ALMOST TWICE AS LIKELY TO VOTE AS THOSE WHO HAVE RECEIVED NO MORE THAN A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA.
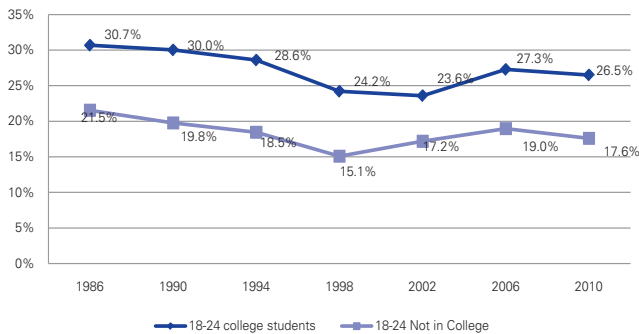
Table 1: Turnout Among Youth Age 18-29, by Educational Level, 1974-2010			
	College	**Non-College**	**Difference**
1974	40.0%	20.9%	-19.1 points
1978	39.9%	20.2%	-19.7 points
1982	41.4%	23.6%	-17.8 points
1986	36.6%	20.7%	-15.9 points
1990	36.0%	20.2%	-17.8 points
1994	35.7%	15.8%	-19.9 points
1998	29.9%	13.8%	-16.1 points
2002	29.8%	13.9%	-15.9 points
2006	30.4%	13.1%	-17.3 points
2010	30.8%	14.2%	-16.6 points

In the 2010 election, young people age 18 to 24[2] who were currently in college were more likely to vote than their peers who were not currently attending college, by a margin of nine percentage points.

STATE-BY-STATE VOTER TURNOUT FOR 2010[3]

Among the states that had sufficiently large and reliable samples in 2010, youth voter turnout was highest in Oregon (35.7%), North Dakota (35.5%), South Carolina (34.9%) and Minnesota (34.6%). Voter turnout in 2010 was lowest in Nebraska (13.6%), Indiana (13.8%), Texas (16.1%), and Tennessee (16.4%). Turnout gaps between young people and adults varied between 20 and 35 points depending on the state. South Carolina, Hawaii, West Virginia, Arizona, Nevada, Mississippi, Georgia and Virginia had some of the smallest gaps between youth and adult turnout.

For more information on the youth vote in 2010, please visit http://www.civicyouth.org/official-youth-turnout-rate-in-2010-was-24/ ★

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Graph 4: 18-to-24 year-old Citizen Turnout, by Current College Status, 1986-2010

Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplements 1986-2010

ENDNOTES

1   Individuals with college experience have a high school diploma and have attended, but not necessarily completed, college, technical school, or community college. The turnout rate of those currently enrolled in college was 27%.

2   School enrollment status questions are asked only of 18-to-24 year old respondents. Therefore, we cannot estimate the turnout among college students who are 25 and older.

3   Several states have not been reported because, due to their small populations and sample sizes, CPS must collapse more than one age group in order to increase the number of publishable estimates. Therefore, we have followed the CPS model and have not reported turnout in states where the youth sample must be combined with other age groups. All turnout estimates are subject to random error and to inflation due to self-reports. The Oregon youth turnout figure of 35.7% is incompatible with the Oregon Secretary of State's estimate, which is based on voter records. It may be either a random error or a case of especially high over-reporting.

Full-time college students were more likely to vote (26.8%) than part-time students (24.9%). Moreover, young African American current college students were more likely than their White counterparts to vote in 2010 (29.6% versus 27.4%). Latino college students lagged behind their peers, with a turnout rate of 22.7%.

HOW DO STATE ELECTION POLICIES AFFECT YOUTH VOTING?

Several state legislatures are considering various reforms to their election laws in advance of the 2012 elections. CIRCLE has reviewed several studies that examine how state policies affect youth voting rates. Below is a summary of what we have found.

GIVING YOUNG PEOPLE INFORMATION LOWERS BARRIERS TO VOTING

Several states are considering policies designed to educate young people about the political process. Every state currently requires its public schools to include some form of civic education in their curricula.[1] New research by Jennifer Bachner suggests that students who complete a year of American government or civics are 3-6 percentage points more likely to vote than peers without such a course, and 7-11 percentage points more likely to vote than peers who do not discuss politics at home. [2]

RAYMOND E. WOLFINGER, BENJAMIN HIGHTON, AND MEGAN MULLIN FOUND THAT MAILING SAMPLE BALLOTS TO REGISTERED VOTERS AGED 18 TO 24 WHO HAVE LEFT HOME INCREASES THEIR TURNOUT BY MORE THAN EIGHT PERCENTAGE POINTS.

States can also provide information about elections directly to young people by mailing them sample ballots or the location of their polling place. Raymond E. Wolfinger, Benjamin Highton, and Megan Mullin found that mailing sample ballots to registered voters aged 18 to 24 who have left home increases their turnout by more than eight percentage points.[3] This suggests that a lack of information could be a barrier to first-time voting – an obstacle that can be overcome by helping young people familiarize themselves with the voting process.

ELECTION-DAY REGISTRATION CAN HELP BRING YOUNG PEOPLE TO THE POLLS

Policies designed to ease the process of voter registration also hold promise for increasing youth turnout. One of the biggest barriers to youth voting is the registration process. Registration often involves more time and information than voting itself, and in many states, registration is closed weeks before the Election Day. In fact, in the 2008 presidential election, 21% of 18- to 29-year-olds who did not register to vote stated that they had not met the registration deadlines in their states. An additional six percent stated that they did not know where or how to register and four percent said that they did not meet the residency requirement for registration. Election Day Registration laws (EDR) allow voters to avoid the inconvenience and pressure of registration deadlines.

Research shows that states that have policies supporting EDR, on average, have higher youth voter turnout. Mary Fitzgerald found that allowing voters to register on election day boosts turnout among young people, on average, by an estimated 14 points in presidential years and four points in midterm elections.[4] Research by Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Amanda Nover, and Emily Hoban Kirby found that the effect is greatest for young people with no college experience, suggesting that EDR could help remedy the turnout gap for low-socioeconomic status citizens.[5] Other reforms, such as "convenience voting" – for example, allowing voters to mail in their ballots or opening the polls for in-person early voting - are less certain to boost voting rates. Fitzgerald did not find that allowing early voting significantly increases turnout, while Kawashima-Ginsberg et al. found that early voting and absentee voting were generally used by young people who would have voted in any case – not the most disengaged youth.

MIXED EVIDENCE ON VOTER ID LAWS AND REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

Other state policies seek to make registration and voting less vulnerable to fraud. All states must require voters who register by mail to provide identification with their name and address, but 28 states require some additional proof of identity. Voters in Indiana and Georgia, for instance, must show a photo ID to cast a ballot.

TIMOTHY VERCELLOTTI AND DAVID ANDERSON, ON THE OTHER HAND, FOUND THAT REQUIRING A PHOTO ID DECREASED TURNOUT BY 2.9%, WITH MORE PRONOUNCED EFFECTS FOR MINORITIES (WHO ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY LIKELY TO BE YOUNG).

Evidence about whether such requirements disenfranchise legitimate voters is mixed, but studies generally agree that their effects are not large. Stephen Ansolabehere found that only a fraction of a percent of voters were turned away for lack of proper ID;[6] Timothy Vercellotti and David Anderson, on the other hand, found that requiring a photo ID decreased turnout by 2.9%, with more pronounced effects for minorities (who are disproportionately likely to be young).[7] Alternatively, states can make registration (rather than voting) more restrictive – a special concern for young people, who are more likely to be mobile and registering for the first time. Jesse Richman and Andrew Pate found that students who live away from home are approximately ten percentage points less likely to vote in states that place "special burdens" on students seeking to register.[8] Moreover, R. Michael Alvarez , Morgan Llewellyn, and Thad E. Hall claim that restrictions of this kind send an "implicit message" about who is expected to engage in politics, perhaps discouraging young voters from even attempting to participate.[9] ★

ENDNOTES

1   Tiffani Lennon, "ECS Policy Brief: Citizenship Education" (National Center for Learning and Citizenship, 2006), retrieved from http://www.ecs.org/clearing-house/71/30/7130.pdf

2   Jennifer Bachner, "From Classroom to Voting Booth: The Effect of High School Civic Education on Turnout," in press, preprint available via www.gov.harvard.edu.

3   Raymond E. Wolfinger, Benjamin Highton, and Megan Mullin, "How Postregistration Laws Affect the Turnout of Registrants," CIRCLE Working Paper #15 (June 2004), retrieved from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP15Wolfinger.pdf

4   Mary Fitzgerald, "Easier Voting Methods Boost Youth Turnout," CIRCLE Working Paper #1 (February 2003), retrieved from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP01Fitzgerald.pdf

5   Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Amanda Nover, and Emily Hoban Kirby, "State Election Law Reform and Youth Voter Turnout," CIRCLE fact sheet (July 2009), retrieved from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/State_law_and_youth_turnout_Final.pdf

6   Stephen Ansolabehere, "Access Versus Integrity in Voter Identification Requirements," Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project Working Paper #58 (February 2007), retrieved from http://www.vote.caltech.edu/drupal/files/working_paper/vtp_wp58.pdf

7   Timothy Vercellotti and David Anderson, "Protecting the Franchise, or Restricting It? The Effects of Voter Identification Requirements on Turnout," prepared for the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting (2006), DOI: 10.1.1.123.2549.

8   Jesse Richman and Andrew Pate, "Can the College Vote Turn Out? Evidence from the U.S. States, 2000-08," State Politics and Policy Quarterly 10:1 (2010), retrieved from spa.sagepub.com/content/10/1/51.full.pdf

9   R. Michael Alvarez, Morgan Llewellyn, and Thad E. Hall, "How Hard Can It Be: Do Citizens Think It Is Difficult to Register to Vote?" Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project Working Paper #48 (July 2006), retrieved from http://www.vote.caltech.edu/drupal/files/working_paper/vtp_wp48.pdf

NEW CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS REPORT TO BE RELEASED IN SEPTEMBER:

CIRCLE has joined with the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the National Conference on Citizenship, and the Lenore Annenberg Institute for Civics at the Annenberg Public Policy Center to update and re-release the groundbreaking Civic Mission of Schools Report. The original report, released by CIRCLE and the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 2003, highlighted the problems confronting civic learning and offered practical solutions to strengthen civic learning for every student. The new report will highlight new research, lessons learned and best practices developed since 2003. The report will be released September 16th in conjunction with the annual National Conference on Citizenship at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia.

CHECK OUT OUR NEW BLOG!

You ask, we answer! CIRCLE recieves hundreds of requests for data analysis each year from practitioners, members of the press, policy makers, etc. These questions help us to focus our research on relevant topics and are also a source of our new blogging efforts. Each week, CIRCLE will post a blog entry to our website with data and analysis generated from a question posed to us from the field. Following are a few of our recent posts. Please visit www.civicyouth.org to view our latest posting. And, please help us spread the word. Posts can be shared via facebook and twitter!

HERE ARE TWO OF OUR RECENT BLOG POSTS...

"YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE OSAMA BIN LADEN NEWS," BY PETER LEVINE (CIRCLE DIRECTOR)

Yesterday, I was on KCBS radio news in San Francisco discussing why spontaneous public celebrations of the death of Osama bin Laden seem to draw mainly young adults. (A typical headline is this, from the New York Times: "9/11 Inspires Student Patriotism and Celebration.") Given the format of drive-time radio news, I just had time to say that today's 21-year-olds were at an especially impressionable age on 9/11/2001. They were first becoming aware of the big world of news and current events and did not yet have deeply held views. For them, the terror attacks would be especially influential, and Osama bin Laden would loom especially large.

I think that's true, but in a different setting, I would mention some nuances.

> ### IN THIS CASE, WE DON'T KNOW WHETHER SPONTANEOUSLY SHOUTING "U-S-A!" WHEN OSAMA BIN LADEN WAS SHOT IS AN AGE EFFECT OR A COHORT EFFECT.

First, it's interesting that the celebrations were spontaneous and occurred in many different locations simultaneously. That suggests some breadth of interest and passion. Yet only a few thousand people participated, out of roughly 40 million young adults. I am not sure we should draw any generalizations at all.

Second, scholars like to try to distinguish between age effects and cohort effects. An age effect is the result of being at a certain point in one's life when something happens. For example, people who are eight years old at any given moment in history are less interested in sex than people who are 21 at the same moment. That says nothing about generational differences; it is a pure age effect. A cohort effect is the lasting consequence of going through an event when one was young. For example, people who experienced World War II have differed from other generations all their lives.

In this case, we don't know whether spontaneously shouting "U-S-A!" when Osama bin Laden was shot is an age effect or a cohort effect. It could be that people who are 21 (and especially if they are male) are always relatively likely to celebrate the violent death of a national enemy. Or it could be that people who were at an impressionable age when 9/11 occurred will always care more than others about the al-Qaeda story. There is not enough data to know which theory is right, if either one is. If I had to guess, I'd bet on an age effect.

There has also been a lot of discussion about a recent Red Cross poll that found: "Nearly 3/5 [of] youth (59%) – compared to 51% of adults – believe there are times when it is acceptable to torture the enemy." One of the leading explanations is a cohort effect: today's young people have (supposedly) been exposed to more favorable media depictions of torture than earlier generations were and are thus more likely to favor torture (now and in the future). Again, I'd bet on an age effect. I would guess that support for torture among today's young cohort will decline, simply as a result of their growing maturity.

Yahoo reported this week that two thirds of the people who searched the web with the phrase "who is osama bin laden?" were teenagers (ages 13-17). This fact has been interpreted to mean that "a goodly number of teenagers don't know who Osama bin Laden is." Kevin Drum, in particular, thinks that's an age effect: teenagers never know much about the news. I am not sure I agree: many kids who entered that search phrase may have been able to identify bin Laden but were looking for a biography or profile–a wise way to understand the news.

Finally, we don't know much about the motivations and ideologies of the people who spontaneously celebrated. Were they into

CIRCLE IN THE NEWS

■ "CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY INFORMATION," BY ANDREW ATWAL, *YOUTH TODAY*, 6/10/2011

■ "NEW POLICY PAPER CALLS FOR INVESTMENTS IN A NEW CORPS OF YOUNG AMERICANS TO CREATE AND SHARE CIVIC INFORMATION," *YAHOO NEWS*, 6/10/2011

■ "HEY, FLORIDA REPUBLICANS…WHAT'S UP WITH THIS NEW CIVICS CURRICULUM??" BY LINEHOLDER, *REDSTATE*, 5/18/2011

■ "SOCIAL MEDIA: THE NEW FACE OF CHANGE," BY CAYTLLIN HENTZE, *IOWA STATE DAILY*, 5/17/2011

■ "STUDENTS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!" BY LUIS RIVAS, POLITICAL AFFAIRS (BLOG), 5/16/2011

■ "BRINGIN IT HOME: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT" KVNF (WESTERN CO), 5/16/2011

■ "KEEP VOTE-BY-MAIL BALLOTS COMING," *CAMDEN COURIER POST*, 5/11/2011

■ "EFFORT SEEKS TO REVIVE CITIZENS' CIVIC INTEREST," BY JENNY MONTGOMERY, *INDIANA LAWYER*, 4/27/2011

■ "GREEN JOBS WILL TRUMP CLIMATE CHANGE FOR YOUNG VOTERS," BY OLGA BELOGOLOVA, *NATIONAL JOURNAL*, 4/19/2011

■ "OREGON LED NATION IN UNDER-30 VOTING IN 2010," BY JEFF MAPES, *THE OREGONIAN*, 4/16/2011

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the dramatic narrative of a bad guy being gunned down by Navy Seals? Were they moved by the attainment of justice? Was their motivation basically patriotic? Or did they seek the "camaraderie" of a shared, positive, public experience, as one of my CIRCLE colleagues suggests?

"AFRICAN-AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS IN 2008 AND 2010," BY ANDREW MAYERSOHN (CIRCLE INTERN)

If you asked casual observers of American politics who Barack Obama's most ardent supporters were in 2008, they would likely have identified two groups: African Americans and college students. So it's no surprise that African American college students turned out to vote in 2008 at their highest rate in decades:

Graph 1: Adult Citizen Turnout, Presidential Years, 1984-2008
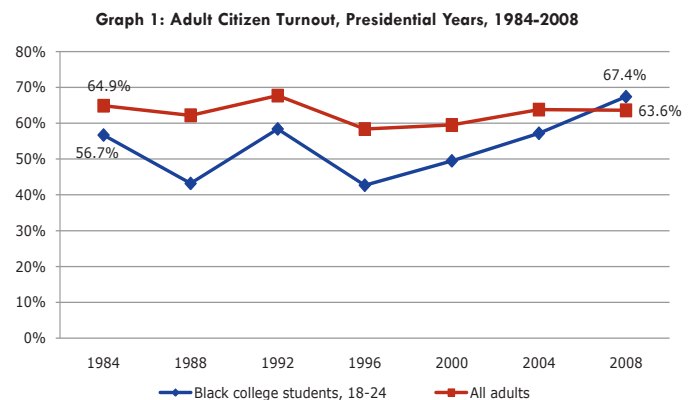
Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplements 1984-2008

Turnout had been rising steadily for African American college students between 1996 and 2004, but that was due, in part, to a rise in turnout among all adults. In 2008, while turnout held steady nationwide, African American college students were ten percentage points more likely to vote than they had been in 2004. They were four points more likely to vote than the average citizen, and nine points more likely to vote than non-African American college students. Did they vote at the same impressive rates in 2010?

THE LANGUAGE OF YOUTH CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS

Since CIRCLE's inception, we have used the term "civic engagement" to describe the broad range of activities that people do for purposes that they consider to be larger than themselves. Using the term "civic engagement" as an umbrella term is useful for research, but at CIRCLE we don't assume that this language is best for all practical situations. In fact, in 2008, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCOC) tested this phrase and others to see if and how the terms resonated with the American public. They found that almost one third of respondents said they did not know what "civic engagement" meant. The report found that, "despite the popularity of the phrase in education today, Millennials were the most likely (at 42%) to say they didn't know what it meant."[1]

> THEY [NCOC] FOUND THAT ALMOST ONE THIRD OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEY DID NOT KNOW WHAT "CIVIC ENGAGEMENT" MEANT.

Given the findings from the NCOC report, we decided to ask several youth-serving organizations about the language they use to describe their civic work. We spoke with three organizations working in three different contexts:

• Learning to Give is a national organization that "educates youth about the importance of philanthropy, the civil society sector, and civic engagement."[2, 3]

• The Institute for Ethical and Civic Engagement is a local organization whose purpose is to "nurture and encourage ethical and civic education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, to prepare our students for a lifetime of service to society as thoughtful, ethical and engaged citizens and contribute to the vitality of the many communities we serve from the local level to the global."[4]

• The Seattle Young People's Project, "a youth-led, adult-supported social justice organization that empowers youth (ages 13-18) to express themselves and to take action on the issues that affect their lives."[5]

INTENTIONALITY

All three organizations reported that they are intentional in their use of language. None use the term "civic engagement" exclusively, but instead use a variety of terms to describe the specific engagement strategies they are promoting. Learning to Give often uses the following terms in their work: philanthropy, service, volunteerism, and nonprofit/civil society sector. According to Learning to Give's Director, Barbara Dillbeck, they do not change their language for different constituencies: "We use the same words, just simplified definitions with children." Dillbeck's experience is that "Kids like big words – if they can say 'stegosaurus' they can say 'philanthropist.'" Learning to Give is actively working against preconceptions about the word "philanthropy." According to Dillbeck, "It's the adults that have a misconception of philanthropy as rich dead men giving money that is slowly being clarified…We have found that it is very understandable for children grades K-12."

The Seattle Young People's Project uses the terms "empowerment" and "youth organizing" intentionally to distinguish their work from other efforts. Co-directors Jeremy Louzao and Sunny Kim say they use these terms "because they accurately capture differences between what we're doing and what others are [doing]." The idea that there are "root causes" to community and social problems is an important idea and lesson for their work, which directly motivates what language they use.

The term "civic engagement" has been used by the Institute for Ethical and Civic Engagement, but is also part of the language used across the UC-Boulder campus (home of the Institute), including by the school's Chancellor, admissions department and other departments. Peter Simons, director of the Institute, says that students receive this language and message from many offices, including consistently from the leadership of the University. It is also a core element of admissions presentations.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE & ACTION

Staff at both the Institute for Ethical and Civic Engagement and the Seattle Young People's Project talked about how language is directly connected to experience. While the term "civic engagement" has "currency" on campus, as Simons describes, students vary in whether they immediately understand it. When asked what works when using the term "civic engagement," Peter Simons says that "when we're using the term, we have to explain it." He sees this as "a positive" because defining the term helps to guide the discussion and encourages further dialogue around the issues they are working on. He also reports that students who become involved in programs of the Institute use and embrace the term. He finds the language becomes more accessible once experience provides students some insight into what it means.

> HARWOOD'S POINT ILLUSTRATES WHY FOCUSING ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AS A SINGLE TERM MAY OVERLOOK OTHER WAYS THAT GOALS MAY BE EXPRESSED. AS LOUZAO NOTED, WORKING WITH YOUTH "HAS GOTTA BE MORE THAN A FEW WORDS – [IT HAS TO BE A COMBINATION OF] WORDS AND IDEAS AND PRACTICES, A CULTURE."

Staff at the Seattle Young People's Project report that the actual words they use are only one part of way they succeed in empowering youth. Co-director Jeremy Louzao says that "chances are…people won't read every word of the [flier] you write," it's about a "whole environment of language and action." In Seattle this happens "because we take youth power and youth leadership seriously," says Co-director Sunny Kim. The Seattle Young People's Project works hard to put their words into action. While they intentionally talk about building youth power, they also make sure youth have power within the organization. For example, they report that youth made up 90% of a recent hiring committee.

For these youth organizations, many factors influence what language they use. Last year, Rich Harwood, the founder of the Harwood Institute, wrote that "too often 'civic engagement' is more like a badge we wear to a cocktail party or conference, where we find ourselves boasting about the extraordinary engagement process we cooked up and implemented. People and impact take a back seat.

We produce events not impact."[6] The Harwood Institute focuses on "breaking down barriers and empowering people to make progress in improving their communities."[7] Harwood's point illustrates why focusing on civic engagement as a single term may overlook other ways that goals may be expressed. As Louzao noted, working with youth "has gotta be more than a few words – [it has to be a combination of] words and ideas and practices, a culture."
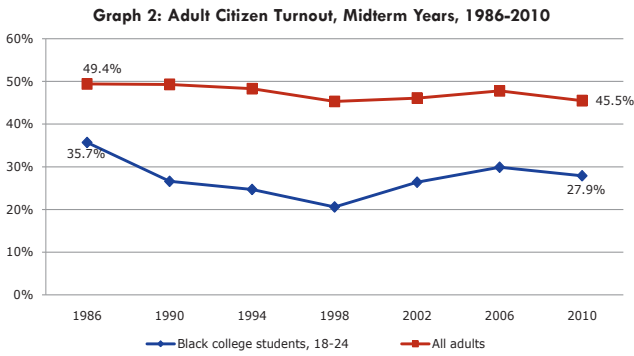
ENDNOTES

1 More results can be found at http://ncoc.net/National
2 http://learningtogive.org/about/ .
3 "In August 2010, Learning to Give became part of generationOn, the youth division of Points of Light Institute"
4 http://www.colorado.edu/iece/welcome.html
5 http://sypp.org/
6 http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org/index.php?ht=d/Blogger/y/2010/m/6/pid/21438
7 http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org/index.php?ht=d/sp/i/12985/pid/12985

Graph 2: Adult Citizen Turnout, Midterm Years, 1986-2010

Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplements 1986-2010

students to vote in the primaries in 2008; perhaps nobody asked for their vote in 2010. ★

In 2010, African American college students – like the rest of the population – voted a rate that was all but unchanged from the last two midterm elections in 2006 and 2002. One possible explanation is that African American college students are especially likely to live in uncompetitive states: 26.3% of all Americans lived in a state where a 2010 senate race was decided by ten points or fewer, against 20.5% of African American college students. Obama's campaign (and those of his competitors) needed these

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