

CIRCLE: ILLUMINATING OUR DEMOCRACY

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Nostalgia can be a troubling pastime, and never more than when we reflect back on the steady decline in the extent to which Americans participate in making our democracy work. Causes of the decline can be traced to various segments of our society, but higher education bears a major share of the blame.

I teach these days at Stanford University, so I'll use it as an example. Freshmen at Stanford in the late 1920s and 1930s were required to take a year-long course called "Problems of Citizenship." The course was one-fourth of the normal first-year undergraduate curriculum, and was rooted in the judgments of the University's founders, Jane and Leland Stanford, that education for civic responsibilities should be the primary goal of undergraduate education.

What a contrast is that course, and others like it, taught at colleges and universities around the country in the first half of the twentieth century, with most contemporary courses in political science today. In the post-World War II years, disinterested, disengaged analysis became the dominant mode of academic inquiry in the social sciences, and quantitative methods became the primary tools of that analysis. Students were no longer encouraged to become actively engaged in making democracy work. They were trained to be observers, not participants.

This perspective had a powerful effect not just on college students, but on the teaching of civics in secondary schools. A primary aim of high-school civics courses in the era before World War II had been to prepare young students to be involved in politics at every level. The new trend drained the civics courses of their activist aims. Learning about government was substituted for participating in it.

Fortunately, over recent decades, there has been renewed attention to the need in our democracy for citizens to be more than spectators. In the year 2000, Robert Putnam sounded an alarm in *Bowling Alone*. Some commentators quarreled with his conclusions, arguing that Americans were finding new ways to engage with civic purpose, but no one could dispute the downward slope of voting and other traditional measures of civic involvement.

What also became clear was the lack of reliable data on the civic involvement of Americans of all ages and especially young people, since unless youth engage in civic work there is little

likelihood that they will do so as they grow older. Further, there was little understanding of what are the most effective means to promote youth civic involvement.

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Fortunately, just a year after *Bowling Alone* was published, CIRCLE was born with a mandate both to promote sound research on youth civic involvement and to publicize means to enhance that involvement. Since then, CIRCLE has become the premier site for those who want to understand how young citizens engage with our democracy. Under the superb leadership of Peter Levine, CIRCLE has provided deep learning about what works and why. In study after study, CIRCLE has provided wisdom on issues relating to civic engagement as well as current data on youth participation in a broad range of civic activities.

"[CIRCLE] is THE go to resource for reliable information and keeps the field grounded."

—LIZ HOLLANDER, SENIOR FELLOW,
TUFTS UNIVERSITY, JONATHAN M.
TISCH COLLEGE OF CITIZENSHIP AND
PUBLIC SERVICE.

CIRCLE was given a particularly fertile home at Tufts' Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service. That College is among the country's leaders in civic education, and CIRCLE nicely complements the educational mission of the College with a strong research component. Recent years have seen significant changes in youth civic involvement, driven in significant part by technology, and CIRCLE is helping us understand these shifts.

I applaud CIRCLE for a decade of outstanding work and look forward to continued CIRCLE leadership in the decades to come. ★

