

THE YOUTH MOVEMENT'S ROLE IN CIVIC REVITALIZATION

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I have come to realize that I have a lot in common with my Millennial students having come of age during the 1990s, witnessing a complete breakdown of public life with vitriolic partisan fights, threats of government shutdowns, and an overall failure of leadership from our nation's political class. And yet I am inspired by the way so many in the next generation are responding to our ongoing democracy deficit. Rather than becoming apathetic, young people are creating a new type of public life—one that is more relational, collaborative, open, and results-oriented.

But the new civic politics that is emerging among our youth is not simply the result of a uniquely prescient group of young people rejecting the dominant public culture. This generation also has the benefit of a host of institutions promoting this different kind of politics, a civic ecology that includes a global network of community-based organizations, civic professionals, democratic educators, and centers on college campuses.

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And for the past decade, CIRCLE has been conducting groundbreaking research on the political and civic engagement of young people, becoming one of the touchstones of these efforts to build a youth movement around civic revitalization. Thus, it seems fair to say that if it takes a village to educate active citizens, by using big ideas and cutting edge research, technology and old-fashioned face-to-face relationships, CIRCLE has become an indispensable part of the civic community.

I can see the value of their contributions in my own work: I have used CIRCLE's research to inform countless projects. From research on educating young people for democracy, to my own practice engaging my college student colleagues, CIRCLE's visionary staff and deep networks provide ongoing guidance and wise counsel.

This hub of civic life also played a central role in my professional development, as supporting a cadre of young scholars has been part of their mission from the beginning. When I was a graduate student, I was lucky enough to receive funding

from CIRCLE that allowed me to finish my dissertation on civic education, for which I am forever grateful because I'm not sure how it would have gotten finished otherwise (and it certainly would have been a much weaker project). Just as important, I got intellectual support and encouragement, along with concrete suggestions, from Peter Levine and the other staff at CIRCLE, which I know they continually provide to other young academics, including through their annual summer institute for civic studies.

As a result of these efforts, there is a new generation of public scholars who aspire to do the kind of engaged research that makes CIRCLE so relevant and timely: to ask good questions, listen, think creatively, and then ultimately, act for a better world.

I have learned that this approach is part of a much longer democratic tradition. The idea of connecting research with the practice of democracy, for instance, emerged out of the settlement house movement led by Jane Addams and then a series of civic experiments such as social centers, learning circles, and citizenship schools over the past century. With this tradition of democracy in mind, John Dewey remarked at the fortieth anniversary of Hull House: "In these days of criticism of democracy as a political institution, [the founders of the settlement house movement] ha[ve] reminded us that democracy is not a form but a way of living together and working together." These same words could easily be said of the work CIRCLE has done over the past decade.

But as the recent debt crisis in Washington, DC has reminded us, CIRCLE is pursuing this alternative conception of democracy in very challenging times. We simply can't afford another generation to witness the continuous meltdown of our commonwealth. Thus, I can think of no better way to celebrate this important milestone than by genuinely listening to the voices of our youngest community members, as CIRCLE does so well. We should use this occasion to audaciously imagine how the new civic politics of so many of our youth can become the dominant politics of the future—and working together to make it happen. ★

