CONCENTRATING ON INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Most research on youth civic engagement locates the problem inside young people's heads—as a lack of knowledge, motivation, or skill—and asks what forms of education and outreach would change adolescents. However, it is also important to consider the cultural and institutional contexts in which young people do or do not engage. Perhaps current circumstances make it impossible or undesirable for some to participate.

In March 2005, an interdisciplinary group of scholars met face-to-face in Washington, DC to discuss youth civic engagement from this institutional angle. The scholars contributed papers to address two main questions: 1) What conditions deter young people's involvement in politics and civic life? And 2) what institutional or cultural changes could enhance youth engagement? These two questions are addressed in a new CIRCLE Working Paper (#45), which is a compilation of 14 articles on the topic of youth civic engagement.

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In the introduction of CIRCLE Working Paper #45, CIRCLE director Peter Levine and James Youniss of Catholic University summarize themes that emerged in the papers and discussions.

First, researchers should consider institutional reforms, not just direct interventions. For instance, "the kind of value-neutrality obsessively nurtured by institutions (especially schools, but also many youth organizations, clubs, etc.) has wrought, perhaps, irreparable damage to the institutional capacity to influence youth in meaningful ways," writes Joel Westheimer, a contributing author to CIRCLE Working Paper #45. Another example is political competition. Unfortunately, many electoral districts are uncompetitive, even though competition and debate mobilize people to participate in large-scale politics. However, as Diana Mutz argues, disagreement can *discourage* participation in smaller associations, neighborhoods, and families, "in part because of the social awkwardness that comes from publicly taking a stand that friends or associates may oppose."

Participants also discussed the economic context of adolescence. Today, students believe that their choices and individual performance have high economic stakes. Although opportunities have increased for many people over the last 30 years, so have the consequences of failure. Adolescents may feel that they face these choices alone because of the relative weakness of families, neighborhoods, religious congregations, and voluntary associations. This sense of risk affects their civic engagement.

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Along with elections and the economy, organizations have changed over time. Just as televised debates between candidates replaced fireside chats on the radio, emergent forms of involvement are taking root today. For example, Dietlind Stolle is exploring the new consumer-based politics in which people organize to boycott or "buycott" (choose to purchase) goods such as food and clothing for normative and political reasons. Surveys show that young people predominate in these efforts.

Finally, immigrants and minority youth face special challenges to engagement, because they are infrequent targets of political mobilization and lack resources that other kinds of youth accrue by way of location or education.

The conference that produced these articles was funded by a separate grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York to the Life Cycle Institute, Catholic University of America. CIRCLE worked with the Life Cycle Institute to organize the conference. Download the complete collection of articles in CIRCLE Working Paper #45, "Youth Civic Engagement: An Institutional Turn," from http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working_papers.htm ◼