



## Research Summary

### POLITICAL AND CIVIC BEHAVIOR

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## Definitions

Political and civic behaviors encompass a wide range of actions. They include engagement in deliberative discussions, volunteering, and attending public meetings, and other activities related to civic life.<sup>2</sup> While these activities are important, most research has largely focused on voting. Many findings show that America’s youngest voters, in particular, have become less engaged over time, although a review of voting rates historically indicates a long term pattern in which older Americans generally vote at higher rates than younger Americans. The voting rates for 18 to 29 year olds in presidential elections dropped from 52% in 1992 to 46 % in 2016, (compared to 71% for voters aged 45-64 in 2016).<sup>3</sup> In mid-term elections, the voting rate for this group declined from

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<sup>1</sup> With edits from Dr. Peter Levine, Tufts University; Dr. Joseph Kahne, University of California Riverside

<sup>2</sup> T Michael A. Rebell, *Flunking Democracy, Schools, Courts, and Civic Participation*, University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 8. In 2000, Robert Putnam examined decline in participation in several types of activities related to civic participation. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, 2000. The Guardian of Democracy report of 2011 provides the following definition of civic participation: “Voting, participating in community meetings, volunteering, communicating with elected and appointed officials, signing petitions, and participating in demonstrations are just a few of the important activities of citizens.” Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, 2011, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas File, “Voting in America: A Look at the 2016 Presidential Election,” U.S. Census Bureau, 2017, available at: [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/randomsamplings/2017/05/voting\\_in\\_america.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/randomsamplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html).

29.5% in 1974 to 16.3% in 2014. Most recently, data on youth participation in the 2018 midterm election indicates a low, but nonetheless, increased rate of participation by young people (31%),<sup>4</sup> that researchers ascribe to the post-Parkland shooting political engagement of a new generation of voters.<sup>5</sup>

## Research Summary

Studies have focused on the impact of four areas of learning on civic behaviors: civics courses, extracurricular activities, community service and service learning.

- **Civics Courses**

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Studies of 1988 and 2002, Bachner found that students who completed a year of civics coursework were more likely to vote in an election following high school than students who were not exposed to civic education (3-6 percentage point increase). The effect was greater among students whose parents were not highly attuned to politics: for them, coursework in civics was associated with a 7-11 percentage point increase in the probability of voting.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> United States Election Project, available at <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics>; CIRCLE, “Young Voters in Midterm Elections,” 2010, <http://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/v7.i4.1.pdf> and <https://civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/>; Thomas File, “Young-Adult Voting: An Analysis of Presidential Elections, 1964–2012,” U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, available at <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p20-573.pdf>.

CIRCLE, “Young People Dramatically Increase Their Turnout to 31%, Shape 2018 Mid-term Elections,” 2018, <https://civicyouth.org/young-people-dramatically-increase-their-turnout-31-percent-shape-2018-midterm-elections/>

<sup>5</sup>“CIRCLE Poll: Ahead of 2018 Midterms, A New Generation Finds its Political Voice,” October 11, 2018, available at [https://civicyouth.org/circle-poll-ahead-of-2018-midterms-a-new-generation-finds-its-political-voice/?cat\\_id=6](https://civicyouth.org/circle-poll-ahead-of-2018-midterms-a-new-generation-finds-its-political-voice/?cat_id=6); Harvard Institute of Politics, “Survey of Young Americans’ Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service,” March 25, 2018, available at [http://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/content/180416\\_Harvard%20IOP%20Spring%202018%20Topline\\_Release%204.pdf](http://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/content/180416_Harvard%20IOP%20Spring%202018%20Topline_Release%204.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Bachner, “From Classroom to Voting Booth: The effect of High School Civic Education on Turnout,” 2010. Jennifer Bachner used data from the 1988 NELS, with a representative sample of eighth-graders from 1,052 public and private schools, and the 2002 NELS, administered to a nationally representative sample of high school sophomores from 752 public and private schools.

In 2014, through a review of nine studies, Manning and Edwards analyzed the assumption that civic education increases political participation among young adults.<sup>7</sup> Although some of their findings on voting ran counter to those of Bachner, they acknowledged that civic education does seem to have an impact on “political expression,” engaging in such activities as signing petitions and contacting elected officials.

- **Extracurricular Activities**

There is a strong scholarly consensus on the positive impact of extracurricular activities, and especially on the fact that certain types of extracurricular activities—such as student government and community service—are predictive of future voting behavior and civic engagement.<sup>8</sup> Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg (2014) found that promoting extracurricular participation and discussion of current issues in schools could be much more effective in increasing future engagement in political life than policies such as early voting and requiring one course on government in high school.<sup>9</sup> Thomas and McFarland (2010) also found that extracurricular activities requiring teamwork and collaboration were positively related to voting.<sup>10</sup>

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7 N. Manning, and K. Edwards, “Does civic education for young people increase political participation? A systematic review,” *Education Review*, 66(1), 2014, pp. 22-45.

8 Margo Gardner, Jodie Roth and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, “Adolescents’ Participation in Organized Activities and Developmental Success 2 and 8 Years After High School: Do Sponsorship, Duration, and Intensity Matter?” 44 *Developmental Psychology* 814, 2008. Jonathan F. Zaff et al., “Implications of Extracurricular Activity Participation During Adolescence on Positive Outcomes,” 18 *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 599, 2003.

9 Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Peter Levine, “Policy Effects on Informed Political Engagement,” *American Behavioral Science*, 58 (5), 2014, pp. 665-688.

10 J. Thomas Reuben and Daniel A. McFarland, “Joining Young Voting Young: The Effects of Youth Voluntary Associations on Early Adult Voting,” CIRCLE Working Paper No. 73, 2010. Reuben and McFarland found that the most robust effects on voting habits resulted from high school involvement in the performing arts. In 2008, Ream and Rumberger concluded that participation in athletics especially predicts lower dropout rates and higher educational attainment, especially for low-income Latino students. Robert K. Ream and Russell W. Rumberger, “Student Engagement, Peer Social Capital, and School Drop-out Among Mexican American and Non-Latino White Students,” 81 *Sociology of Education* 109, 2008.

## **Experiential Involvement, Community Service and Service-learning**

Experience of civic life is central to developing engaged citizens.<sup>11</sup> Participation in student government, speech and debate, model UN and similar activities directly prepares students for civic and political engagement later in life.<sup>12</sup> Community service and service learning, especially when combined with related classroom discussion, show a strong positive correlation with future civic participation, in addition to bringing other benefits such as fostering improved school climate. Both voluntary and school-required community service activities are strong predictors of adult voting and volunteering.<sup>13</sup>

In 2008, Kahne and Sporte found that service learning provides significant benefits to low-income students and students of color, and therefore can be a particularly effective tool in closing the civic empowerment gap.<sup>14</sup>

- **Implementation**

While studies indicate that service learning can be effective, the level of impact depends on the duration and quality of the program and its implementation. As Levine noted in 2005, “in the context of real public schools, however, service-learning often degenerates into cleaning the school playground and then briefly discussing this experience.”<sup>15</sup> Confirming this insight, a 2005 study found that service learning is not necessarily more effective than conventional social studies classes when it is poorly implemented.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Guardian of Democracy*, 2011, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel McFarland and Reuben Thomas, “Bowling Young: How Youth Voluntary Associations Influence Adult Political Participation,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 71, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Hart, Thomas M. Donnelly, James Youniss and Robert Atkins, “High School Community Service as a Predictor of Adult Voting and Volunteering,” 44 *American Education Research Journal*, 197, 2007. Authors note that civic knowledge was related to greater voting habits but not to other forms of civic participation. See also James Youniss, Yang Su and Miranda Yates, “The Role of Community Service in Identity Development: Normative, Unconventional and Deviant Orientations,” 14 *Journal of Adolescent Research* 248, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph E. Kahne and Susan E. Sporte, “Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students’ Commitment to Civic Participation,” 45 *American Education Research Journal* 2008, p. 738.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Levine, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*, Tufts University Press, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Shelly Billig, Sue Root and Dan Jesse, “The Impact of Participation in Service Learning on High School Students’ Civic Engagement,” CIRCLE Working Paper No. 33, 2005,

A 2013 study pointed to limitations in time and resources for professional development as a major challenge to the meaningful implementation of service learning.<sup>17</sup>

Using data from the 1996 National Household Education Survey, Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman found that only “substantial” service, meaning regular and sustained service learning, “stimulates greater political knowledge, more discussion with parents, and the feeling that one can understand politics and express one’s concerns publicly” and that “tolerance of diversity, however, is unrelated to levels of participation.”<sup>18</sup>

## Assessment of Political and Civic Behavior

- **State Standards**

As of 2011, 20 states had state standards related to service learning,<sup>19</sup> but it is unclear how they are implemented and assessed.<sup>20</sup> Only Maryland and the District of Columbia require community service as part of high school graduation requirements.<sup>21</sup>

Examples of large-scale measures of the quality of service learning are limited. The 2011 Guardian of Democracy Report provided guidelines for innovative forms of assessment such as portfolio assessment that can evaluate civic learning in and outside the classroom.<sup>22</sup> No state currently uses portfolios as the primary method of assessment for social studies or civics. One state, New Mexico, offers a social studies portfolio alternative to traditional knowledge-based graduation requirements, but this option is offered only to students who failed to demonstrate competency in social studies through standardized tests.<sup>23</sup>

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17 Lisa Guilfoile and Molly Ryan, “Linking Service-Learning and the Common Core State Standards: Alignment, Progress, and Obstacles,” Education Commission of the States, April 2013.

18 R. Niemi, M. Hepburn, and C. Chapman, “Community Service by High School Students: A Cure for Civic Ills?” *Political Behavior*, 22(1), 2000, pp. 45-69.

19 Subhi Godsay et al., CIRCLE Fact Sheet 9, October 2012, data attachment, available at <https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/State-Civic-Ed-Requirements-Fact-Sheet-2012-Oct-19.pdf>

20 Ann Rautio, “Service-Learning in the United States: Status of Institutionalization,” Education Commission of the States, National Center for Learning and Citizenship, April 2012.

21 Education Commission of the States, “High School Graduation Requirement or Credit toward Graduation — Service-Learning/Community Service,” January 2014.

22 *Guardian of Democracy*, 2011, p. 36.

23 New Mexico Public Education Department, “New Mexico High School Graduation Manual Class of 2022,” available at: [https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2022-HS-Graduation-Manual\\_9.20.18.pdf](https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2022-HS-Graduation-Manual_9.20.18.pdf).

New York State is considering authorizing school districts to implement capstone-based assessments in civic readiness.<sup>24</sup>

- **State Programs that Promote Political and Civic Behavior**

Four states (Arizona, Illinois, California, and Connecticut) have programs that provide incentives for strong civics programs: Democracy Schools in Illinois, for example, is a program that encourages local districts to implement effective civics curricula and associated activities.<sup>25</sup>

A number of school districts have developed programs aimed at informing high school students near or at voting age about voting and registration procedures and encouraging them to vote. Project Vote surveyed the existence of high school registration programs in all 50 states.<sup>26</sup> They recommend that schools teach high school students about the specifics of voter registration, develop local partnerships with civic organizations and encourage students to register to vote, an even consider voting and voter registration as a curriculum requirement.

- **Awards for Civic Engagement**

A few states have created awards for civic engagement. New York City students are eligible to earn a state seal of recognition if they complete 100 hours of service in addition to the requirements for a high school diploma.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the New York State Regents are considering adding a seal for civic engagement as a statewide program.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> New York ESSA Plan, 2018, p. 19, available at:

<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/documents/Attachment2ESEAPublicFacing053018-2.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, *NASBE*, “The Future of Civic Education,” 2016, [http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Future-of-Civic-Education\\_September-2016-Standard.pdf](http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Future-of-Civic-Education_September-2016-Standard.pdf), p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Lauren Forbes, “Best Practices for Implementing Effective High School Voter Registration Programs,” Project Vote, September 2010, available at:

[https://www.essvote.com/uploads/Image/pdf/Best\\_Practices\\_for\\_HS\\_Registration\\_Programs.pdf](https://www.essvote.com/uploads/Image/pdf/Best_Practices_for_HS_Registration_Programs.pdf); Jody Herman and Lauren Forbes, “Engaging America’s Youth through High School Voter Registration Programs,” Project Vote, December 2010, available at:

[https://funderscommittee.org/files/high\\_school\\_voter\\_registration\\_programs.pdf](https://funderscommittee.org/files/high_school_voter_registration_programs.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> NYC Service, “Seal of Recognition for Service,” available at:

[https://www.nycservice.org/initiatives/index.php?bitinitiative\\_id=18](https://www.nycservice.org/initiatives/index.php?bitinitiative_id=18)

<sup>28</sup> New York ESSA Plan, 2018, *supra*, note 23, p. 31.

Harvard’s Graduate School of Education developed a curriculum guide called “Caring Community Youth Capstone” to promote civic engagement through semester- or year-long projects at the high school level. At the core and culmination of the experience, students gather at a school ceremony or event where they display their projects or perform in ways that reflect their growth and the knowledge they have gained. <sup>29</sup>

The National Constitution Center and Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics at the University of Pennsylvania have issued recommendations that propose a national recognition program to incentivize and increase student participation in clubs and community organizations relevant to civic education.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Caring Common Project, “How-to Guide to Caring Community Youth Capstone,” Harvard Graduate School of Education, available at: [https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-mcc/files/youth\\_capstone\\_pitch\\_and\\_guide\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-mcc/files/youth_capstone_pitch_and_guide_0_0.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> *Guardian of Democracy*, 2011, p. 130.