

## CITIZENSHIP, POLITICS, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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BY DEFINITION, DEMOCRACY IS a creative work in progress. Three-quarters of a century after Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address identified government of, by, and for the people as "unfinished work," John Dewey argued that creating democracy remains "the task before us" during the "critical and complex conditions of today" (Dewey, [1939] 1988, p. 225). While acknowledging the danger of external enemies of democracy such as Nazism, Dewey stressed that the gravest threats are internal: the failure to cultivate an understanding of democracy as a way of life involving personal commitments and actions reflecting those commitments. Democracy's persistence, Dewey urged, will ultimately hinge not on military protections or the formal mechanics of elections but rather on our devotion to ideals such as those that Lincoln identified and "the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life" (p. 225).

The struggles of both fledgling and established democracies confirm Dewey's insight: democratic institutions are only as sound as the citizens, actions, and goals that animate them. Democracies need a culture of ideals and practices that can support citizens' involvement in and control over social choices and directions. They also need a culture of responsible participation that can engender and sustain fair, trustworthy, and appropriately accountable political institutions—whether legislative assemblies, courts, or police forces. Although democracy means many things to many people, as we see it democracy is fundamentally a practice of shared responsibility for a common future. It is the always unfinished task of making social choices and working toward public goals that shapes our lives and the lives of others.

## What Do Democracies Need from Their Citizens?

We start with the assumption that reasonably well-informed, capable, engaged, and public-spirited citizens are essential if a democracy is to flourish. To some, this may seem like a given, but in fact, in the realm of political study it is contested. Even the question of what it means for a democracy to flourish is open to debate. Nevertheless, a number of outcomes are fairly widely acknowledged as implicit in the notion of democratic vitality. They include reducing the potential for tyranny and corruption among those with leadership responsibilities; increasing the responsiveness of the system to the public and to a notion of the common good; improving the quality or fairness of political decision making and outcomes; expanding citizens' horizons, opportunities, and general well-being; and striving to maintain a sense of the overall legitimacy of the system and to avoid political injustice or crisis.

### *Citizen Participation*

Even if they come to a rough agreement on the characteristics of a well-functioning democracy, students of politics differ in their views of citizens' proper roles in contributing to democratic health. Some assume that control by political elites is not only inevitable but also beneficial: an egalitarian and active democratic culture is not a core component of a healthy democracy. Others argue that, whether or not informed participation would be a good thing in principle, the average citizen does not possess the basic intelligence or civic-mindedness to participate in an informed way (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960; Converse, 1964; Neuman, 1986; Truman, 1971). And in the aftermath of World War II, amid fears of totalitarianism and mass populism, a handful of scholars argued that widespread citizen participation could be dangerous and perhaps should be discouraged (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954; Huntington, 1975, 1981; Lipset, 1962; Truman, 1959). Dye and Ziegler, for example, suggested, "Political apathy and nonparticipation among the masses contribute to the survival of democracy" (1970, p. 38). These and other scholars express considerable skepticism about the "democratic public" and the potential for ordinary people to participate competently in politics. The influential Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter warned, "The electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede" (quoted in Pateman, 1970, p. 5).

Although skepticism toward the "democratic public" has not completely disappeared, for many influential modern scholars of democracy,

relatively broad-based participation is the defining characteristic of democracy qua democracy (Hanson and Marcus, 1993; Pateman, 1970). It provides basic legitimacy to a democratic polity by demonstrating popular sovereignty—as opposed to oligarchy or rule by a technocratic or tyrannical elite—as rule by the people based on relatively inclusive and egalitarian participatory norms and practices. Political theorists also point to the positive impact of broad-based participation on the health of communities and the quality of decisions. Both theoretical and empirical work suggests that political and many forms of civic participation promote the kind of cooperative orientations that support democracy, such as social trust, reciprocity, and the ability to see beyond one's own narrow interests or perspectives and recognize broader public goals.

Recent research on deliberative democracy, for example, suggests that participating in deliberations about political outcomes leads people to discard inaccurate perceptions of the facts and rigidly held political views, and may yield a greater sense of the overall legitimacy or acceptability of the ultimate outcomes, even if one personally disagrees with them (Barabas, 2004; Ferejohn, 2006; Fishkin, 1995; Rosenberg, 2007). Various forms of participation in public life can also foster more immediately tangible benefits, such as lower crime rates, lower taxes, and stronger schools. (See Gutmann and Thompson [2004] and Mansbridge [1983] for theoretical perspectives on democratic deliberation; see Putnam [1993, 2000], Schlozman [2002], and Schlozman, Verba, and Brady [1999] for descriptions of empirical research.)

Morris Fiorina (1999) and others offer further justifications for encouraging broader-based and responsible participation, pointing to the negative impact of increasing polarization and very narrow bands of political engagement on democratic norms and political culture. While many Americans are disengaged from politics today, those who are participating are more strongly partisan and ideological than at any point in the past fifty years (Bartels, 2000). The increasing polarization of the electorate and political leaders is producing a political landscape many find troubling for democracy: greater political mistrust and alienation, less likelihood of talking across differences, greater likelihood of rhetoric associated with “culture wars,” an inability to compromise, and distorted public judgment or a decreased ability to learn from new information that should influence public opinion (King, 1997; Mutz, 2002; Mutz and Mondak, 2006; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2006; Uslaner, 1993; Wolfe, 2006).

Fiorina argues that in spite of the increased opportunities for average Americans to get involved in politics, individuals who “come disproportionately from the ranks of those with intensely held extreme views” are

more motivated to do so. The result is “a politics that seems distant from the views of ordinary people” (1999, p. 418). Yet if we encourage broader political engagement—Fiorina suggests finding innovative ways to reduce the time and energy costs of participation—those who attempt to influence public affairs are more likely to include the full range of political perspectives, including more moderate views. Thus, increased breadth of political engagement can have a tempering effect on a political system that seems to be growing more polarized. If a basic premise of democratic politics is that it is valuable for people to consider and evaluate different viewpoints, then we should be concerned about political trends toward more selective participation, which work against this premise and undermine the open and civil consideration of a range of opposing views.

### *Informed, Responsible Citizens*

Despite political scholars’ differences about the value of citizen participation and the goals of this participation, even relatively minimalist or procedural conceptions of democracy focused on voting assume, either implicitly or explicitly, that people should be politically informed. This basic need to remain politically informed presupposes that citizens have also gained the basic competencies they need to understand the issues, contextualize current events, and make reasoned decisions about political alternatives presented by officials or the media, as well as the motivation to maintain a minimal level of awareness.

Being politically informed, it turns out, is closely related to being politically engaged: implicit in the goal of having a politically informed populace is the assumption that citizens possess political knowledge and reflective judgments that are useful in guiding their voting or other political activities. This means people need to care enough about or have enough interest in politics that they are willing to invest energy in gathering, interpreting, and applying relevant information.

Most political theorists also point to the importance of public adoption of, or at least compliance with, some basic democratic values. These essentially moral values include an endorsement of individual worth, equality, and rights; a willingness to support majority rule in accordance with constitutional principles; and a commitment to pluralism and political tolerance that permits nonviolent means for resolving differences. The idea of *responsible* citizenship also conveys the sense that we consider questions of a greater or common good, consider the importance of values or long-term goals beyond our own narrow self-interest, and take personal responsibility for our commitments and actions.

Obviously, the way one defines *democracy* shapes the way one thinks about what kind of citizens democracy needs and what roles educational institutions should play in forming citizens. We operate from a relatively pluralist definition of what a good citizen is or does in American democracy, but we do not believe, as some do, that democracy can be healthy without widespread participation or on the basis of well-designed institutions or expert elites alone. Political egalitarianism requires that as many people as possible possess basic democratic competence and that institutions whose missions include supporting democracy should find ways to contribute actively to this essential goal. This notion reflects not only our own perspectives on democracy but also those adopted by important educational policy initiatives. For example, the national education goals of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 included the goal of adult literacy and lifelong learning, which mandated that every American adult possess the knowledge and skills necessary to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Center for Civic Education, 1994).

### What Counts as Political?

Clearly, we align ourselves with the political theorists who see broad-based political engagement as a good thing for democracy and for individuals themselves, at least when that participation is thoughtful, well-informed, and grounded in core democratic values. But this conclusion begs the question of what exactly we mean when we talk about specifically *political* engagement—understanding, skill, motivation, and participation.

Of course, electoral politics—voting, participating in campaigns or political parties, contacting elected officials, running for office, and the like—is an important part of the political domain. Indeed, many political scientists' conceptions of political activity focus particularly on actions related to the electoral and representative component of democracy—actions intended to influence the selection of public officials and their political decisions (Brady, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Early studies of political participation defined democracy in terms of electoral components, often measuring participation primarily as voting in national elections (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960).

Expanded notions of political participation include direct, local, or non-conventional political activities, such as citizens' personal involvement in community decision making, and informal political discussions through which citizens refine their own views or influence the views of others (Barber, 1984; Boyte, 1980; Mansbridge, 1983; Pateman, 1970). Notions of

participatory and deliberative democracy highlight the value of the processes as well as the outcomes of political interactions, including collective decision making in venues where many influential choices and goals are pursued, such as workplaces or community groups. Deliberative democracy particularly emphasizes the value of discussing public problems under conditions that are inclusive and respectful, conducive to reasoned reflection, and premised on mutual willingness to understand others' perspectives and involve the possibility of refining values around common interests and developing mutually acceptable solutions (Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Dryzek, 2000; Elster, 1998; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996).

We endorse these broader definitions of political engagement, including what Harry Boyte (1980) and others have called "the citizen politics of public work," building on the belief of John Dewey ([1927] 1988, p. 212) that "sharing in common work" is a crucial element of human life. The notion is that citizens work together to mediate differences so they can establish and achieve shared goals that contribute to the public good. This form of political engagement may intend to influence government action, but often it does not. Thus it goes beyond the definition of political participation focused primarily on electoral politics and representative democracy put forward by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). In this view, political actions are not limited to selecting representatives, influencing their choices, and holding them accountable, but can occur at different structural levels and through a range of informational or communicative channels or social networks, using many different strategies for political expression and influence.

## **A Broad Definition of Political Participation**

This wider view of democracy embraces efforts to participate through informal or nongovernmental institutions as well as those seeking to influence public officials or formal government entities. Thus, sketched broadly, political participation can include working informally with others to solve a community problem; serving in many types of neighborhood organizations and groups that have a stake in political policies or outcomes; supporting political causes or candidates financially; participating in public forums on social issues; discussing political issues with family and friends or trying to influence coworkers' political opinions; working on a campaign for a candidate or issue; writing letters or politically oriented electronic journals (blogs); signing petitions and participating in various forms of policy advocacy and lobbying; raising public awareness about social issues or mobilizing others to get involved or take action

through rallies, protests, sit-ins, street theater, or public awareness campaigns; participating in collective consumer efforts intended to achieve political goals, such as purchasing or boycotting particular products or making investment decisions in support of social-political causes; and of course, voting in local or national elections or perhaps even running for public office.

A broader understanding of the variety of ways that people can exercise their political voice and will recognizes that the form as well as the substance of politics shifts over time. Television broadcasts of early civil rights protests in the 1960s, for example, not only provoked realization of the shameful inequality experienced by black Americans but also created awareness of the political effectiveness of methods of protest politics and the power of gaining public attention for political messages and goals. As a result, sit-ins and other forms of civil disobedience introduced by civil rights activists in the late 1950s have become common tactics among many U.S. social movements, ranging from right-to-life activists to supporters of same-sex marriage (see, for example, Gorney, 1998; Moats, 2004).

A broader definition of political activity that includes things like wearing a political message on one's T-shirt or participating in sit-ins or street theater implies that political action cannot be defined solely in terms of the instrumental goal of pursuing political interests in the electoral arena. In this broader conception, political actions frequently involve expressive goals or efforts to identify shared principles or common concerns, to challenge or shape others' political ideas, or to express or develop one's own political understandings and views (Chong, 1991).

### **Political Participation as Conceived in the Political Engagement Project**

The conception of political participation that informs the Political Engagement Project takes elections to be central to representative democracy. However, it also values these broader understandings of the modes and contexts of democratic activity and the more expansive understandings of the goals of political activity they suggest. Although the political realm can be described by characteristic features, including particular contexts (the voting booth, the candidate's fundraising breakfast), activities (petitioning, lobbying, protesting), or targets of action (the governing board of the university, the town council), the core meaning of the term *political* is not ultimately derived from its association with any finite set of domains, undertakings, or focal points. Rather, the defining feature—what makes a given activity *political*—rests on the political nature of the goals

or intentions animating the activity: goals connected to individual and group values, power, and choice or agency, and the desire to sustain or change the shared values, practices, and policies that shape collective life.

## Generational Shifts in Concepts of Politics

Taking a broad view of the political domain is especially important in research and interventions involving college students, because, insofar as they are politically involved at all, many young people seem to be drawn more to direct participation in the public sphere than to electoral politics. A group of students who participated in a Kettering Foundation study in the early 1990s, for example, expressed the belief that traditional politics is all but irrelevant to their lives and said they would be interested in participating only in a “different kind of politics,” such as one that brings people together at the community level (Creighton and Harwood, 1993). More recent college students have voiced similar skepticism toward conventional politics (Longo and Meyer, 2006).

Technological changes have contributed to the ways in which today’s young people experience, understand, and participate in politics (Rimmerman, 1997; Zukin and others, 2006). As recent elections have shown, the Internet is not only an important source of political information but also a nexus for political action (Zukin and others, 2006). Among those young people who are politically active in some way, Web sites, blogs, MySpace pages, electronic petitions, and online discussion groups can provide outlets for political expression. The work of young “netroots” activists (grassroots activists who participate in politics via the Internet) is believed to have assisted a number of candidates in recent years, particularly Democrats (Schneider, 2005). Technologies such as e-mail and text messaging are also used to mobilize support for real and virtual protests, such as demonstrations against U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq (see, for example, Associated Press, 2003). Thus, although these and other modern-day demonstrations have roots in the protest politics of the 1960s, their form and focus are being reshaped by modern technologies and political concerns.

Other modes of political participation have special appeal for the younger cohorts that some have termed the Dot-Net or Millennial Generation (or Generation M)—for example, consumer politics, boycotting or buying (*buycotting*) particular goods because of the producer’s internal or external policies (Zukin and others, 2006). In addition, compared with the general population, high school and college students are more likely

to select—or create—clothing or accessories to call attention to their social and political values, such as wearing “identity bracelets” and T-shirts advocating social causes.

### *More Forms of Participation, Lower Rates of Participation*

This rich array of new strategies for political action is an important reminder that some young people *are* highly politically engaged and that college can be a particularly fruitful time for developing such interests and habits. A number of the students who participated in the courses and programs we studied in the PEP fall into this category. Still, these important initiatives and opportunities tend to reach only small numbers of students, and active participation in politics, particularly electoral politics, remains more the exception than the norm among young Americans, including undergraduates and recent college graduates. Although not all evidence points consistently in the same direction, there is persuasive research suggesting that current generations of young people are less knowledgeable about and interested and involved in politics than were prior generations at the same age (Putnam, 2000).

Overall participation rates are lower now than they were for earlier cohorts of college students. Interest in and discussion of politics has dropped since the 1960s. Although rates of political interest and involvement have increased since 2000, they have not reached the levels shown in the 1960s and 1970s, even taking into account the full range of activities defined as political under a broad conception of that domain (Sax, 2004). Although some studies suggest that this political disengagement is often accompanied by deep skepticism or hostility toward conventional politics (see Walker, 2000), more recent research indicates that most politically inactive young people cannot articulate a clear reason for their lack of participation (Zukin and others, 2006).

### *Civic Engagement as an Apolitical Alternative*

Studies of young people in the most recent cohorts suggest interest, instead, in what could be called an *apolitical* alternative to politics. Perhaps as a result of their distrust of conventional politics, many undergraduates believe volunteering is a more effective outlet for their energies. For example, in a national survey, a majority of students said that doing volunteer work for organizations that help the needy can bring a lot of change, whereas much fewer believed that conventional political activity could do so (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2001). This is consistent

with surveys carried out by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, showing that community service volunteer work has increased to more than 80 percent among incoming college students in recent years, even as political engagement has declined (see Sax, 2004).

Similarly, in some qualitative studies, such as those conducted by the Harwood Group, students say that they can make a bigger difference on social issues through direct service volunteer work than through conventional political activities, implying that community service might be seen as a particular strategy through which to pursue political or quasi-political goals (Creighton and Harwood, 1993). Student leaders from twenty-seven campuses issued the statement titled “The New Student Politics” after participating in a conference on civic engagement. In this passionate statement, they argue that “community service is a form of alternative politics, not an alternative to politics. Participation in community service can be undertaken as a form of unconventional political activity that can lead to social change” (Long, 2002, n.p.). The prevalence of this view on college campuses is supported by survey data; more than a quarter of students in the Harvard University Institute of Politics Poll (2005) said they believe volunteering for community organizations *is* a political activity.

Clearly, civic and political engagement shade into each other; the boundaries between them are not sharp. Civic engagement is valuable in its own right and some forms of community involvement can have important political dimensions. Even so, we do not believe that *all* community service counts as or can be automatically equated with political activity. We believe that it is important to distinguish between political participation and non-political civic participation, while acknowledging that the two represent different points on a single continuum and contribute to each other in a number of ways. It is important to make the distinction as best we can, because nonpolitical civic engagement does not guarantee political participation (Galston, 2001). The sources of motivation for the two are often different, the skills they require overlap, but not completely, and the two frequently take place in different kinds of institutional settings.

## Relationship Between Civic and Political Participation

Despite its relatively broad scope, our definition of politics does not include all civic participation. Although we think it is critical to take young people’s understanding of politics into account, on this point we must disagree with a fair number of them. The boundaries of the political realm are often permeable, but emphasizing the role of political goals

and motivations focused on networks of power and accountability, public choices and public work, and policy issues and the systemic dimensions of social issues and problems helps us understand the dividing line between political and nonpolitical undertakings that may otherwise share similar contexts or actions.

Applying these criteria, we do not count as political many common forms of community service, such as tutoring children, cleaning up a public beach, volunteering at a senior center, or stocking shelves in a food pantry. Our definition also excludes organized social and civic activities that may be important for building social capital and individual satisfaction, such as book clubs, athletic leagues, or religious organizations, except when those groups take on political goals.

Our definition of politics also excludes individual lifestyle choices and personal commitments such as energy conservation, recycling, or organic food consumption or gardening unless these are intended and structured to contribute to broad social or institutional change, such as through identifying one's actions with broader movements working on these issues, participating in related groups, supporting related causes, or selecting leaders who hold favorable views on these issues.

For example, at a recent showing of Al Gore's film on global warming *An Inconvenient Truth*, young people greeted patrons outside the theater with brochures about modest changes they can make in their homes or driving patterns to help reduce global warming. Although they were not attempting to influence policymakers, we would include these young people's activities in our conception of politics because they were intended both to raise awareness of these issues and directly change other individuals' behavior. In contrast, if film patrons followed a suggestion in the brochure—switching to energy-saving lightbulbs, for example—we would not count that action as political unless they joined a larger movement to help shift public behavior more generally. It is noteworthy in this regard that in their 2006 study of political participation, Zukin and his colleagues found that 90 percent of those who reported having engaged in consumer activism said that they saw it as an individual activity rather than as part of an organized campaign.

### *Does Voluntarism Lead to Political Participation?*

It is important to understand the complex nature of the relationship between civic and political participation if we are to develop strategies for preparing students for high-quality political participation. If civic voluntarism prepares students well for and is causally related to later political participation,

then we ought to have relatively little concern for the current generation of young people, because so many of them participate in direct service volunteer work. The question, then, is whether the high rates of volunteering that characterize today's students and young adults will translate into high levels of political engagement as they move further into adulthood.

There are both empirical and theoretical reasons to believe that something like this may be going on. A number of political scientists have pointed to what Verba, Schlozman, and Brady refer to as "the embeddedness of political activity in nonpolitical institutions of civil society" (1995, p. 40). Both political scientists and developmental psychologists point out that experience with civic voluntarism contributes to political participation to a significant degree (Putnam, 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Youniss and Yates, 1997).

There are several reasons for this connection. First, organizations can operate as sites of recruitment into political activity, with participants being more likely to receive requests to take part in campaigns, rallies, or other activities; to contribute money; or to join a letter-writing effort. Participating in civic activities incorporates people into social networks that may encourage or invite their political activity, or encourage them to develop a particular political stance or act on a political issue.

Civic engagement also often exposes participants to political knowledge and stimuli, potentially increasing their interest in and concern about political issues "as when a minister gives a sermon on a political topic or when organization members chat informally about politics at a meeting" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995, p. 40). Or, as Richard Brody has suggested, although a typical bowling league is likely to begin as an apolitical social group and to remain that way indefinitely, it could become politically active if, say, the town government sought to use eminent domain to purchase its space and construct a public parking lot, just as one's elk-hunting or trail-running club might engage in a letter-writing campaign if the state decided to change the use conditions in state forests (Brody, personal e-mail to one of the authors, September 17, 2001).

Another important point of connection is that various forms of civic engagement pursued by adolescents and adults can provide opportunities for participants to develop civic capacities, such as communication, organizational, or advocacy skills, which serve as resources for political participation, effectively reducing the barriers posed by a lack of political competence (Battistoni, 1997; Mann and Patrick, 2000). Possession of the types of skills that can be acquired from involvement in clubs and community organizations is among the most important predictors of political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). In line with these the-

oretical formulations of the relationship between civic and political participation, scholars have found empirically that politically active individuals are more likely than their inactive peers to have participated in community service, clubs, and other organized activities in high school (Smith, 1999; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Youniss, McLellan, Su, and Yates, 1999).

### *Necessary Conditions for Developing Political Capacity*

The relationship between nonpolitical civic participation and political participation is more complicated than this analysis suggests, however. It is clear that organizational involvement *can* build civic skills, expose participants to political issues, and successfully recruit members into political activity, but it is also clear that this happens only under some circumstances. The degree to which organizational involvement leads to the development of important political capacities and civic skills depends on the nature of the organization or other setting for participation, and even more, on the role of the participant in that organization or setting.

If participation is to lead to the development of politically important skills, the role should be one in which the individual needs and therefore practices those skills. Key activities that support the development of politically important skills (those identified by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995), for example, include writing letters, taking part in decision making about institutional matters, planning or chairing meetings, and making presentations. Some kinds of volunteer work or organizational participation, as well as many roles in the workplace, require the participant to develop or exercise these sorts of skills, but many kinds of volunteer work and organizational participation do not.

Similarly, some organizations raise political issues in more compelling ways than others, and thus increase the political knowledge, interest, and concern of their members. Organizations with explicit political agendas, such as the Sierra Club and the National Rifle Association, are more likely than garden clubs or self-help groups to invite some degree of political engagement.

It follows, then, that there is a much greater chance that civic participation will lead to political participation if the volunteer activity offers opportunities to develop political knowledge and high-level organizational and communications skills, which in turn support a stronger sense of political efficacy. When the activities also draw participants' attention to political or policy issues, they can be valuable in increasing their political interest and concern, which are key components of political motivation.

Unfortunately, this does not happen in many of the volunteer service activities in which high school and college students usually participate. This is especially true for the so-called drive-by voluntarism in which many students engage—a day spent cleaning a public beach or serving meals in a soup kitchen. In line with this analysis, research suggests that in younger generations these forms of civic involvement often remain separate from political engagement and do not alleviate their alienation from political institutions and processes (Gray and others, 1999; Mason and Nelson, 2000; National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999).

## **PEP Faculty Reflections on Political and Civic Participation**

When we interviewed faculty and students who participated in the Political Engagement Project, we asked about their personal experience and perceptions of the relationship between relatively apolitical volunteering or community involvement and political engagement. Their comments reinforce the picture we have outlined: civic participation can potentially contribute to political development but often it does not realize that potential.

The PEP faculty feel strongly that it is important to distinguish between political engagement and nonpolitical civic engagement even if it is sometimes difficult to identify precisely the line separating the two. In their ongoing observations of and work with students, they are clear that these two sets of activities are different in important ways and that performing community service will not necessarily ensure that students develop interest or expertise in the political domain.

As Adam Weinberg, former director of the extracurricular program Democracy Matters, put it: “When I wanted my daughter to learn how to swim, I didn’t give her bike-riding lessons, I gave her swimming lessons.” Weinberg is pointing to a theme we heard in many of the faculty interviews: some political skills can be learned from taking part in community service but most cannot—or at least they are not typically developed in the kind of community service that the great majority of students perform. If you want students to develop political skills, it is much more effective to engage them in overtly political activities than to hope that they will gain these skills through a set of activities that is likely to be quite removed from political action.

Many faculty made the point that connecting direct community service with political learning can be extremely productive but that this connection seldom happens spontaneously. For fruitful connections to happen, faculty need to be intentional about fostering a better understanding of the relationship between their direct service activities and related political and policy issues.<sup>2</sup>

Faculty noted several ways that community service and political engagement can enhance each other if these connections are made. If students are guided to learn about and engage with policy issues that are directly related to the community service they are doing, the service activities provide graphic illustrations of the social issues the policies are meant to address, giving students an immediate and often emotionally compelling sense of how these issues are manifested in people's everyday lives, what they look like "on the ground." Connecting these concrete manifestations of social issues with systemic, political analyses of related concerns "raises macro-level questions about micro-level issues" and vice versa, according to PEP faculty participant, Ross Cheit, who teaches the course *Children and Public Policy* at Brown University. (See Appendix A, "Course and Program Summaries.") These concrete experiences with real people coping with the broader social issues under consideration often increase students' interest in and motivation to engage with the political or policy-level analyses, which can otherwise seem rather remote and abstract.

### **PEP Student Understanding of Political and Civic Participation**

Interviews with PEP students make it clear that they see the relationship between community service and political engagement in much the same way that faculty do. Many, though not all, of these students had previously taken part in community service, as most of today's high school and college students do at some point (Sax, 1999). There was a consensus among undergraduates in our study that students usually do not make the connection between civic and political engagement on their own and are seldom helped to make those connections by the faculty or program directors who are involved in overseeing experiences like service learning, volunteering, or participating in student clubs or organizations. These students found their experiences in the Political Engagement Project courses and programs to contrast sharply with their previous volunteering and community service experiences. In the PEP courses and programs, faculty went out of their way to make those connections, and students universally found this extremely enlightening and productive.

In addition, direct service activities are most often performed in connection with local or national nonprofit organizations—organizations that are sometimes directly tied to political initiatives or goals and other times are indirectly tied to politics and public policy through the problems they seek to address. Thoughtful faculty find ways to help students become more aware of this fact and its implications, paying particular attention to the role of nonprofits in the wider political economy, both in the United

States and abroad. As one student in the Model United Nations course taught by Dick Reitano explained, “I don’t think I would have recognized, prior to Model UN, that small organizations really can have a big impact.”

In thinking about the needs addressed by nonprofits, students often mentioned that political work is needed if systemic problems or shortcomings that gave rise to those needs are going to be addressed in a comprehensive way. This kind of response reveals both the advances and the limitations represented by students’ emerging understanding of the relationship between the immediate needs addressed by community service and the policy environment, which can profoundly affect the social problems that generate those needs. Recognizing the importance of this relationship is clearly an advance in understanding over that of students who provide direct service without any awareness of the wider phenomena those individuals’ challenges represent, the impact of political affairs on those phenomena, and the potential for political agency and action around those phenomena. Yet students still have a limited understanding if they believe there can be an effective and broadly acceptable governmental solution to every social issue. At the very least, this perspective represents one particular position with regard to the appropriate role of government (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999), one that is not acknowledged or examined by these students—or, in some cases, their teachers.

It is worth noting that this formulation of the role of legislation and government action is consistent with research findings on young Americans’ conception of citizenship as carrying a wide array of rights and benefits but entailing very limited obligations. A number of studies have found that young people expect that public institutions will meet the needs of the populace but have not thought much about what this would mean or about the range of alternative conceptions of the role of government. In our view, this points to the need to explore with students a wider range of perspectives on the complex relationships among a variety of private, nonprofit, and public institutions that share functions in a complex political economy. These conversations can also profit from attention to the full array of forces that can contribute to systemic change, including but not limited to government action. For example, the environmental protection movement involves everything from lobbying for government-based public policy, attempts to change consumer behaviors such as demand for high mileage cars, and raising awareness about other behaviors of communities and individuals, such as recycling.

But from what students in the PEP reported, as well as what national surveys suggest, it appears that students are seldom encouraged to consider

the full range of options available for addressing the issues and problems they care about. Instead of imagining an often complementary spectrum of civic and political actions that can be brought to bear on any given problem, they tend to think instead in bifurcated terms of the direct service volunteer work they are most familiar and comfortable with on the one hand and government action on the other.

## **The Role of Structures and Incentives**

Because civic engagement does not automatically prepare students for effective political participation, it seems clear that more explicit attention to political learning is necessary if we are to take full advantage of higher education's opportunities to prepare thoughtful, skilled, and active citizens. Indeed, that is the central premise of the Political Engagement Project and this book.

Believing that a better understanding of the reasons for the gap between rates of community service and political engagement can help inform our efforts to engage students in politics, we asked the PEP students why, in their opinion, they and many of their peers are so much more likely to participate in service than in politics. Many offered explanations that are familiar from the research literature on the topic: It is easier to see that you are having an effect when you help individuals; the rewards are often more reliable and immediate. We don't see the relevance of politics for our lives. We don't trust politicians or the political process. (See, for example, Creighton and Harwood, 1993; Sax, 2004.)

### *A Route to Political Engagement*

Yet these familiar responses were not the most dominant theme in our conversations with PEP students about the disparity between civic and political engagement. A different point came up over and over, in both the student and the faculty interviews: students are offered a great wealth of opportunities to do community service but they perceive very few opportunities and little encouragement to become politically involved. Students are strongly encouraged to do community service—even required to do so in many high schools and some colleges. Community service is incorporated into many college courses, and there are well-elaborated infrastructures on every college campus. The route to becoming politically engaged, however, remains unclear to many students. It is unfamiliar territory, whereas community service has become almost as familiar as going to school. As one student at the Sorensen Institute for Leadership put it: “There was

always more pressure toward community service, and more opportunities available. High schools promoted community service activities, but never, ever, promoted a political engagement activity. I don't remember that happening even once. Community service is just so much more emphasized to our generation."

The PEP faculty also pointed to the many opportunities for community service that students are exposed to throughout high school and college compared with the few available for political involvement. Like many of the faculty, Marshall Ganz, who teaches courses on community organizing at Harvard, commented that the community service model is so powerfully inculcated in students throughout many years of their schooling that it has become familiar and comfortable, whereas more politically focused engagements with communities are entirely novel to most college students.

It is often assumed that people feel varying degrees of motivation to participate in either community service or politics and become involved to the degree that they are motivated to do so. This implies that our task as educators is to motivate them in order to ensure that they become engaged. Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997) have suggested that this model has the causality reversed—that motivation is largely the *result* of engagement rather than the cause. Young people are recruited to participate in civic or political institutions and processes for many different reasons, including incentives that may have little to do with intrinsic motivation. Then, in the course of participating, they develop relationships that inspire them and make demands on them, gain satisfaction that they could not foresee, and begin to expand and reshape the values and goals that led them to participate, often shifting their sense of identity in the process.

If there is any truth to this alternative formulation of motivation and engagement, the relative absence of opportunities and encouragement for political engagement, in contrast with the plethora of opportunities to engage in nonpolitical service, may provide a more powerful explanation for the disparity than the usual accounts—that students are turned off to mainstream politics, and so on. It may be that young people's high levels of involvement in community service but not politics is less a story of their natural inclinations and choices and more a story of structures of opportunity and incentives provided by adults. The imbalance can be read as a striking success story about efforts to encourage young people to give back to their communities and about the lack of any comparable effort to get them politically involved. This interpretation is consistent with Sax's interpretations of the rise in volunteerism, based on her research using the Higher Education Research Institute surveys. Sax offers three explana-

tions for the rise in volunteer experience among incoming college students: “(1) the increasing numbers of service programs supported by federal and state governments; (2) the increasing numbers of service learning opportunities at the elementary and secondary levels; and (3) the growing numbers of high schools requiring community service for graduation” (2004, pp. 67–68).

### *Creating Pathways to Political Engagement*

We know that well-organized efforts to strengthen political participation among undergraduates and other young Americans can succeed, suggesting that young people will respond favorably to being treated seriously as potentially powerful political agents. In recent years, nonpartisan efforts to turn out the youth vote, such as the World Wrestling Entertainment’s partnership in Smackdown Your Vote and Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, seem to have contributed to an increase in young people’s political participation in the 2004 and 2006 elections, boosting political awareness, voter registrations, and voting, particularly among groups who tend to participate less, including young blacks. (See, for example, Student PIRGs’ New Voters Project, 2006.)

We believe that the domain of political engagement—and thus, the citizenry necessary for a healthy democracy—is ripe for just such a success story if educators and others in control of opportunity structures and incentives begin paying serious attention to this important domain. This would involve creating structured opportunities, offering encouragement, and providing other incentives for reducing known barriers to and increasing familiarity with political participation.

#### NOTES

1. For example, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady define political engagement as “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of those people who make those policies” (1995, p. 38).
2. For concrete examples of how PEP faculty and program leaders are encouraging their students to draw connections between service experiences and larger political issues, see the “Research/Action Projects and Simulations,” “Placements,” “Reflection and Journals,” and “Examples of Student Work” sections of the PEP document supplement at [http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/educating\\_for\\_democracy/docs/](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/educating_for_democracy/docs/).