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A Retrospective on Civic Life in Texas

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A Retrospective on Civic Life in Texas

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the Honorable Annette Strauss, former Mayor of Dallas,
model-citizen, stateswoman, humanitarian, and philanthropist.

May we celebrate her contributions and let her efforts guide us as we continue to improve
the health of civic life in the great state of Texas.

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Abstract

A Retrospective on Civic Life in Texas

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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Civic life in its healthiest state is a dynamic, open, and reflective system that serves the needs of the public and improves the quality of life for all its members. A vibrant civic sphere helps citizens become less vulnerable to exploitation, hardship, harm, and allows everyday voices access to the powers that influence their lives. Yet most citizens today feel that the political arena has become too hostile, irrational, and polarized to expend their energy trying to affect it. Texas in particular is experiencing some of the lowest levels of civic engagement in the nation. The framework of this report holds on to both the notion that a healthy civic sphere is vital to the social fabric of our nation and to idea that citizens have legitimate reasons why they do not currently engage more in the process. These new dynamics in the landscape of political life warrant a moment of reflection which this retrospective seeks to offer. This paper uses Current Population Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau to explore whether we are we asking the right questions, if we have enough information, and outlines what the data we do have is telling us about civic life in Texas.

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Introduction

As Americans, we all share the same proud title -- we are citizens. It's a word that doesn't just describe our nationality or legal status. It describes the way we're made. It describes what we believe. It captures the enduring idea that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another and to future generations, that our rights are wrapped up in the rights of others; and that well into our third century as a nation, it remains the task of us all, as citizens of these United States, to be the authors of the next great chapter of our American story.¹

In many ways we are in a significant moment in our shared history. It is the second decade of a new century. Citizens are calling for major political debate about taxation, revenue, and the appropriate role of government which encourages all of us to wrestle with our deepest, most earnest values and beliefs. Advances in technology have created new platforms for learning, connection, and engagement that have completely transformed our thinking about what is possible. American youth are the most networked generation in American history.² Globalization has shrunk our world and we are now more than ever not only citizens of these United States, but also citizens of the world. These significant changes and new dynamics in the landscape of political life warrant a moment of reflection which this retrospective seeks to offer.

This paper will outline what we know about civic life in Texas: its possibilities, dynamics, and constraints. It will also offer a snapshot of the current health of civic engagement through analyzing data from several questions included in the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Surveys. If President Obama is right that we are the "authors of the next chapter of our American story"...then, this paper asks the question, well, then... what are we writing?

¹ Remarks by President Barack Obama in the 2013 State of the Union Address. Retrieved from: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>

² Pew Research Center. *Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change*. February 2010. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewresearch.org/millennials/>

Civic life in America is ever-changing. Our country is situated in a new 21st century environment with modern demands that invite all of us to shy away from applying outdated notions or expectations to our understanding of how to best solve contemporary problems. Civic life is ideally a dynamic, open, and reflective system aimed to serve the needs of the public and improve the quality of life for all its members. It is defined by its environment and is built on the hard work of citizen engagement. Its vitality is determined by the proper function of our governmental processes and the system's ability to meet the needs of its members. Our chapter in American history will be a reflection of the experiences, needs, and level of engagement of our citizens in being co-creators in our public's work.

Civic health materializes when citizens are able to solve problems, build trust and confidence with each other and with their elected representatives, talk about issues of importance in public spaces, influence the decisions that shape their communities, and feel like they can make a difference in the betterment of their society. A healthy and vibrant civic sphere helps citizens be less vulnerable to exploitation, protects them to the best of our ability from harm, and allows for everyday voices to be heard in what government does on their behalf. Citizen engagement is the responsibility of any member in a society and it is the way to give back to a system that offers certain privileges and protection. Civic life is what unites us and keeps us connected to the community in which we live.

The decision to act and engage is more complicated than the simple question: do you vote or not? The activist spirit does not reside in all of us and legitimate barriers exist that could affect one's choice to engage in the process. How one is socialized to think about civic life plays a dominant role in shaping their behavior and beliefs throughout their lives. What we learn from our parents, what we absorb from our experiences in

school and with public institutions, and what we know about our own values and ethical boundaries vary from person to person, citizen to citizen. The ambiguity around what it means to be a citizen confuses us all. What is the appropriate role of government? When is civic action appropriate? What are my obligations to my community and nation? What is a fitting moral judgment? This report seeks to honor the complexity of the everyday citizens' experience.

The analysis takes the “person-in-environment” perspective and does not presuppose that we all agree on the same notions of one's duty to country or community. Citizens deserve a certain level of compassion when exploring this topic, one that honors the complexity and dynamics of modern life, and kindness that holds on to both the notion that citizen engagement is vital to the social fabric of our nation and to idea that citizens have legitimate reasons why they do not engage more in the process. Suggesting what is right for civic life isn't the goal of this report, but rather to explore the questions, what do we know about civic life and is the information that we do have comprehensive enough to make conclusions about the health of our civic system?

These are important questions for the whole nation to be examining, but Texas in particular, is on the forefront of major changes in civic and political life that offer rich opportunities for learning. The state's size, changing demographics, and overall economic resiliency offer an interesting environment, ripe with opportunities for discovery. To many Texans it often feels as if the whole nation is watching as we write our chapter of the great American story. As the second largest state in the union, the prosperity of our citizens has implications for a whole variety of industries and national well-being. Texas is home to over 8% of the total U.S. population and is as large as New

England, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and North Carolina combined.³ Texas is home to eight of the top 100 largest private American companies.⁴ In 2011, Texas' real gross domestic product (GDP) doubled the national GDP growth in the same year (3.3% vs. 1.5%).⁵ Texas is also one of the most rapidly growing states in the country and has been for many decades.⁶ By 2020, Hispanic/Latino residents will make up the majority of Texas' population and with the state's enticing allotment of 38 Electoral College votes, these shifting demographics and growing economy is something that political professionals and the national media are watching closely as we move toward the 2016 presidential election.⁷

A majority of the data presented in this report is drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Civic engagement indicators are derived from a November 2010 civic engagement supplement. Information about volunteering is from the volunteering supplement, administered every September since 2002. Finally, information about voter registration and voting is attributed to the 2010 CPS voting supplement, which is administered every other November in even-numbered years. Only three data sets were used to produce the

³ *Texas Almanac*, Texas Historical Society. Retrieved from: <http://www.texasalmanac.com/topics/environment/environment>

⁴ Forbes. America's Largest Private Companies. Retrieved from: http://www.forbes.com/lists/2011/21/private-companies-11_rank.html

⁵ American Community Survey, 2006-2010, Census Decennial Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics Economic Census Industry Series.

⁶ D'Ann Peterson and Laila Assani. *The Changing Face of Texas: Population Projections and Implications*. The Dallas Federal Reserve. Retrieved from: http://www.dallasfed.org/assets/documents/research/pubs/fotexas/fotexas_petersen.pdf

⁷ San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Texas Population Growth, Projections, and Implications (2012). Retrieved from: <http://www.sahcc.org/economic-research/texas-population-growth-projections-and-implications/>

findings discussed in this report. Data that is not footnoted is assumed to be from the U.S. Census Bureau's CPS supplements.

Compared nationally, Texas does need a more vibrant and open civic system. The state was 10 percentage points behind the national average of 45.5% of eligible citizens who voted in the 2010 midterm elections. During that same year, Texas ranked 51st among the 50 states and Washington D.C. in voter turnout, with a rate of 36.4% for citizens aged 18 and over. But voting cannot be the only proxy for representing our state's civic health; we also need citizens to contact their public officials, join community organizations, and talk about public affairs with family and friends. Unfortunately, the state has a long way to go on a variety of these key indicators as well, which will be outlined later in this report. The problem is that when close to 64% of eligible citizens choose to sit on the sidelines on Election Day, it allows for a small minority to make major decisions for the majority. When only 9% of Texans take leadership roles in community organizations, are we really civically healthy?

This professional report is intended to draw on research from the fields of public affairs, social work, political science, education, and communication to offer foundational information about the state of civic life in Texas. It is a beginning to a deeper understanding of our civic health with the hope of identifying what we do know and what we do not. This research will highlight the important elements that impact and shape our thoughts and beliefs about the civic sphere, will share initial findings about civic engagement behavior in Texas, and then will isolate a set of research questions for future analysis on the topic.

Chapter 1: What is Civic Life?

Civic life is a construct that social scholars use to capture the interplay of a variety of agents that influence communal prosperity. It is a paradigm created by humans and thus, calls for researchers to begin their analysis by laying out the dynamics that have shaped the idea of civic life, both historically and in modernity. Dr. Roderick P. Hart, founding director of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life likes to say that “citizens are not born, they are made.”⁸ Since all things that are made are created by the resources and constructs of the environment surrounding the maker during a particular moment in time, this statement would imply that our frameworks for democracy, our beliefs and values about what is good or just, our expectations and resources for engagement, and the needs and dilemmas of our modern time have all served to co-construct our concept of citizenship.

How we define civic life and the concepts of what it means to be a good citizen is central to being able to analyze the topic and ask the right questions. This report draws on the theory of social constructionism, which “cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be... and invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us.”⁹ In this frame, civic life in Texas is a co-constructed reality and an idea derived from the “daily interactions between people in the course of social life.”¹⁰ And since each of us has countless daily interactions with a variety of situations that form our ideas and beliefs

⁸ Dean Roderick P. Hart. (2009). Campaign Talk: Why Elections Are Good for Us. Princeton University Press.

⁹ Vivien Burr. (2003). Social Constructionism. Edition 2. Routledge, 2003. Pg.2. Retrieved online from: <http://books.google.com/books?id=Z5CYe3O170EC&lpg=PP1&ots=hAcev1q8zO&dq=Social%20Construction%20Social%20Work%20&lr&pg=PA2#v=onepage&q=Social%20Construction%20Social%20Work&f=false>

¹⁰ Ibid.

around civic life, it is important that this report begins its analysis from a place of exploring these essential elements. This report will also suggest that in our modern times, there is not one shared notion of good citizenship, nor is there a clear indicator or measurement to benchmark the health of civic life. “These negotiated understandings can take a variety of different forms” and therefore our questioning must begin with a discussion of the numerous possible social constructions of the civic world.

Neither researchers nor activists can assume their own personal construction is the correct point of reference for civic life. One of the more typical examples of how social constructionism plays a role in civic life, public policy, and addressing social problems is to reference the effect that the Temperance movement had on how the public handled, viewed, and created policy addressing the problem of alcoholism. Until the 18th Amendment was repealed in 1933, alcoholics were seen as entirely responsible for their behavior and it would be characteristic of the time to blame them for their actions and convict them to imprisonment. Women were increasingly afraid of the violence that alcoholism was causing in their towns, individuals were spending all of their earnings at saloons, and the popular values of religious life were being threatened. The consequences of the problem were real and at the same time, socially constructed by their environment and beliefs. Although sending the men to jail did temporarily remove that individual from causing direct harm, the cycle of alcoholism continued without addressing the root cause of the problem. In time, citizens and public officials realized that prohibition was a failed policy and once it was repealed they began to see a new form of treatment emerge and prove to be even more successful at addressing the concerns of the public. Management began to take the medical and psychological elements into consideration instead of simply punishing the offender and sending them off to jail. It took a shift in citizen’s understanding and the public’s willingness to say that

not all policy is good policy to arrive at the decision to repeal the law and address the problem of alcoholism through other avenues.

The temperance movement and the story of prohibition policy illustrate how values play a role in civic life. “Values are the lens through which individuals filter and process information and experience.”¹¹ Even our assumptions about commonly accepted principles of civic life should be questioned and discussed from all points of view. For example, the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) believes that an essential value of civic engagement is the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.¹² The IAPP’s belief about citizen engagement strikes directly at the heart of that organization’s essential beliefs about human decency, individual rights, and the political process. But, citizens might not all agree with the IAPP’s values that people have the right (or obligation) to be involved in that way. Perhaps a citizen might believe that a more appropriate level of involvement rests in electing the right representative and therefore will defer to their elected official’s expertise instead of inserting their own. This is where we see elements of our diverse democracy shine and where the variety of political philosophies that we each ascribe to produce a complex system often more ambiguous than definite.

Political ideology across the nation is quite fragmented and every political poll indicates that there is still not common consensus around these fundamental elements of civic life. However, consensus might not be what’s most important. Our chapter will be defined by those that engage and those that do not, regardless of whether or not we all agree to a commonly held belief or definition about citizenship. Therefore, before we

¹¹ Flanagan, C., Torney-Purta, J., Sherrod, L. (2010) *Citizen Education: A Critical Look at a Contested Field*. Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth. John Wiley and Sons, Inc. NJ. pg. 163.

¹² International Association for Public Participation. (2007). *IAP2 Core Values of Public Participation*. Retrieved from www.iap2.org.

begin outlining the current levels of citizen engagement, it would be prudent to explore what generations before us believed about civic life.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CITIZENSHIP

Our founding fathers thought about citizenship in a very different way than we do today. The founders were generally “hostile to political parties and to politically oriented associations. They expressed significant reservations about a free press, the open deliberation of legislative bodies, candidates’ solicitation of the votes of citizens, and public education” says Michael Schudson, author of *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. “The United States has come from an era dominated by gentlemen to one dominated by parties, to one in which many groups and interests not only compete for political power but also contend with one another to define what powers are political.”¹³ The scholar continues to postulate that there have been three distinct eras in civic life since the colonists first arrived and in the past forty years we have entered into the fourth era.¹⁴ Dr. Michael Delli Carpini, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication offers an excellent overview of these various waves of citizenship in his review of Schudson’s book:

In the first era, roughly corresponding to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, citizens deferred to the leadership of political elites, and civic responsibility consisted mainly of affirming the legitimacy of this ruling caste. In the second era, in place throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, citizens played a more central role, though one orchestrated by strong local party organizations that mobilized the masses through patronage, entertainment, and other individual, material rewards rather than through detailed appeals to ideology or issues. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterized by two somewhat competing models. The dominant model emphasized managerial efficiency, a nonpartisan professional press, and government run by experts. The second, less dominant model emphasized the direct participation of citizens in

¹³ Schudson, M. (1998). *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. The Free Press. pp. 295.

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 5

politics and policy making. The final era, beginning in the 1950s and characterizing much of today's politics, is dominated by the "rights-conscious" citizen. In this model, individual and collective rights drive the plot lines of politics, and the judicial rather than the executive or legislative branches, becomes the center stage on which these dramas unfold.¹⁵

The transformation illustrated makes logical sense. Our democracy has evolved naturally from the dominance of political elites making decisions on behalf of the nation behind closed doors to an outcry for stronger political parties and public influence. To the next wave which was fueled by deep disillusionment with political parties to the emphasis of government being run by experts, not partisan elites. And finally, to the political culture we witness today: one dominated by legal rights and the judicial system.

In each of these waves our culture has developed new ideas about what it means to be a *good citizen*. The first idea of a *good citizen* in the United States, Schudson postulates, is the *virtuous citizen*, a citizen of deference and a “citizen who knew his place.” There was a deep sense of trust in others and in one’s community. The second ideal citizen was a *political party enthusiast* and was adamantly loyal to the platforms those parties espoused. Then at the end of the 19th century, Schudson suggests that the notion of the “*informed citizen*” was developed in part as a reaction to the “the Mugwump reforms that sought to make elections educational and the Progressives after them who tried to insulate the independent rational citizen from the distorting enthusiasms of the political parties.”¹⁶ The *rights-regarding citizen* was created thereafter by an emphasis on the judicial process in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Finally, the last

¹⁵ Carpini, Michael. (2000). Review of Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School for Communication.

¹⁶ Michael Schudson. (Summer 1999). Civic Catalyst Newsletter. *Why “the Informed Citizen” is Too Much to Ask- and Not Enough*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/civccat/displayCivcat.php?id=210>

wave of citizen identity in Schudson's book was that of the *monitorial citizen*, who engages in "environmental surveillance more than information gathering."¹⁷

MODERN CONCEPTS OF CITIZENSHIP

At the most basic level, citizenship can be defined in narrow, legalistic terms: citizens are members of the nation and have rights guaranteed by the Constitution.¹⁸ A citizen is someone who is a member of the state and has particular rights and duties, including the right to participate in governance. In our democracy, citizens enjoy a range of political rights, including the right to be represented in the affairs of the state.¹⁹ These rights are aimed to promote peoples' ability to impact decisions, rules, structures and processes that affect their lives and protect their freedoms and individual liberties. Citizens' rights in a democracy are counterbalanced by the responsibilities of citizenship. The other side of having the right to codetermine the 'rules of the game' is the responsibility to uphold the rules that were agreed to.

Another modern view of citizenship focuses on responsibilities, where citizens are encouraged not only to claim the rights that are due to them, but also to be aware of the rights of others and to take some responsibility for protecting them.²⁰ Thomas Ehrlich suggests in his book *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* that a morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own. Such an individual is willing to see the "moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when it is

¹⁷ Ibid. Schudson (1998). pg. 311

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Citizenship Resource Center. Retrieved from: <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/citizenship>

²⁰ Westheimer, J. and Kahne, J. (2004). Educating the "Good" Citizen: Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals. *Political Science & Politics*. Volume: 37 page:241

appropriate.”²¹ In this definition, the concept of volunteerism is important and participation in public life is seen as a duty. The “good citizen”²² is neighborly, takes care of others and is concerned about the community at large.

Perhaps the most complex view of modern citizenship is based on the idea of the citizen as co-creator, working in partnership with government to address society’s problems (big and small) and to develop solutions of lasting, public value.²³ Understood in this way, the framework for public life is not determined only by government through formal structures, but is created by citizens themselves. Decisions are not made from the top down. Rather, citizens work together to “identify issues, diagnose problems, develop strategies, form coalitions, and work on problems to effect political change, and to create things of public importance.”²⁴ This view of the citizen is based on the belief that ordinary people of all ages have different talents, insights, and skills to help solve complex problems that government cannot solve on its own. The joint work of citizens and government is a way of co-creating the world we live in.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Many would argue that the viability and success of our democracy depends on citizen participation. In this view, citizen engagement is critical to the integrity of the representative system and ensures that elected officials hold the opinions, wishes, and needs of their constituents with the utmost importance and value. Active citizenship is essential for working toward greater transparency and accountability in government as

²¹ Thomas Ehrlich. (2000) *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*. American Council on Education: Series on Higher Education and The Oryx Press. Westport, CT.

²² Russell Dalton. (2007). *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*. Cq Press.

²³ ICivics. The Basics of Being a Civic Hero. Retrieved from <http://www.icivics.org/web-quests/civic-heroism>

²⁴ Ibid.

well. If citizens merely vote and show no further interest in the affairs of the state, then democracy could easily be threatened by politicians making public decisions behind closed doors or spending tax dollars without culpability for their choices. President Lincoln put it perfectly when he said that our government is a “government of the people, by the people, [and] for the people”²⁵ and therefore, our democracy cannot function unless citizens are active participants in shaping its future.

CONSTRUCTIVE CIVIC DISPOSITIONS

American constitutional democracy is based on the idea that the system cannot accomplish its purposes unless its citizens are inclined to participate thoughtfully in public affairs. In this view, traits such as “public spiritedness, civility, respect for law, critical mindedness, and a willingness to negotiate and compromise”²⁶ are indispensable for its vitality. Citizens must have dispositions that foster respect for the responsibility of self-governance and value of human dignity by honoring the rights and choices of individuals and feel compassion for the well-being of their fellow man. Thoughtful and effective participation in public affairs also requires certain dispositions like “honesty, open-mindedness, persistence, courage, and tolerance of ambiguity.”²⁷ Members of our society are encouraged to understand the value of patriotism and the underlying principles and philosophy of American democracy.

Due to the current polarized nature of political life, positive civic dispositions are pivotal to being able to more actively participate in self-governance and productive policy-making. Citizens and our elected officials not only need to offer their ideas to the

²⁵ The Gettysburg Address. Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. November 19, 186. Retrieved from: <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>

²⁶ Center for Civic Education. *Examples of How Citizens Can Participate*. Adapted from: <http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=912erica>

²⁷ Ibid.

larger political discourse, but must be willing to listen to others and connect on shared values that benefit the whole nation, not just a select few.

HOW CAN CITIZENS PARTICIPATE?

Citizen participation is vital for making sure that government remains in touch with its people, by constantly bringing diverse needs, concerns, views and perspectives into the decision-making process. The most obvious way that citizens participate in democracy is by voting in elections. There are, however, many additional ways for citizens to play an active role in democratic governance. Citizens participate in democracy when they:

Figure 1: Examples of How Citizens Can Participate

Join a political organization	Participate in civil society organizations	Pay taxes
Run for office or take leadership roles	Start an advocacy project	Take part in the work of a political party
Take part in protest marches or demonstrations	Stay informed about what is happening in the legislature	Attend public meetings about critical issues
Encourage citizen debate and participation	Lobby government around a specific issue	Boycott or Buycott places or products as a form of protest
Engage in political conversation online	Write letters to elected officials and the media	Offer expert opinions at the Legislature
Serve as a poll-watcher or election official	Disseminate information on important issues of public concern	Work as a volunteer
Serve as a juror	Serve in the armed forces	Engage in radio debates
Stay informed about policy, programs and budgets	Use art to make a political statement	Donate to a charity or cause

NEW PLATFORMS FOR ENGAGEMENT

In many ways, there is no roadmap for civic engagement in the 21st century, but rather opportunities all around us to reinvent civic life. Without question, the Internet and new technology have transformed our experiences and opportunities around being a citizen. The millennial generation is creating new methods for accessing information, contacting public officials, solving problems, and engaging their peers. The new technology landscape has brought us within one degree of separation from the everyday happenings of the White House and Washington, D.C. A leading organization in the field of online political engagement shares in their manifesto that,

for almost no money, anyone can be a reporter, a community organizer, an ad-maker, a publisher, a money-raiser, or a leader. If what they have to say is compelling, it will spread. The cost of finding like-minded souls, banding together, and speaking to the powerful has dropped to almost zero.²⁸

Additionally, organizations like *Code for America*, comprised of self-proclaimed “web geeks, city experts, and technology industry leaders,” are helping governments to “work better for everyone... with the power of the web.”²⁹ Mobile applications like *See, Click, Fix* allow citizens to “report and track non-emergency issues” like broken traffic lights and potholes all from the convenience of their mobile device.³⁰ Some may even argue that the Internet is the new public *polis*, and with approximately 66% of social media users using new media platforms to “post their thoughts about civic and political issues, react to others’ postings, press friends to act on issues, vote, follow candidates, ‘like’ and link to others’ content”,³¹ it would seem that they had a substantiated argument.

²⁸ Personal Democracy Forum. About Us. Manifesto. Retrieved from: <http://personaldemocracy.com/about-us>

²⁹ Code for America. About. Retrieved from: <http://codeforamerica.org/about/>

³⁰ See Click Fix. How it Works. Retrieved from: <http://seeclickfix.com/how-it-works>

³¹ Pew Internet and American Life Project. *The Demographics of Social Media Users*. February 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Social-media-users.aspx>

Not only are everyday citizens using new technology in inventive ways, so are the political elites. Campaigns are using the Internet to raise money and hold town hall meetings between candidates and constituents. We can be friends with our political representatives on Facebook. Some of our elected officials are even hosting their office hours online instead of making constituents come to their offices. The White House has created a platform for citizen-generated online petitions, where every topic that gets at least 100,000 signatures in 30 days will receive an official response. In this way, citizens can appeal to the government on any issues they choose and the variety ranges from gun control to the reformation of the U.S. Post office. Citizens have even used the system to effectively lobby for the official White House Beer recipe.³²

It is not clear where this new road will take civic life in the future. But, what is encouraging is that these new platforms are motivating a new generation to own their roles as members of our society, to see their inherent connectedness with each other, and is inspiring all of us to really rethink how, why, and for what purpose we can and want to engage in civic life.

³² The White House. *We the People: Your Voice in Government*. Retrieved from: <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/response/ale-chief-white-house-beer-recipe>

Chapter 2: Theories for Exploring Civic Life

Theory provides a framework for understanding complex problems and helps to guide action toward addressing solutions. A good theory helps to identify gaps and barriers that could guide interventions, but also encourages us to ask pertinent and useful questions that deepen understanding. Civic life as a unit of analysis is so large that a helpful frame supporting one's ability to explore the diverse elements is essential. Three questions were used to identify what theories were the most important to include in this analysis: is there a theory that would allow researchers to cast an inclusive enough net over this expansive topic that will help us identify all of the influences that play a role in the topic; what are the features that help individuals develop their civic identity; and, what are the agents that motivate or discourage civic engagement behavior?

It is important to note several key assumptions in this report that have influenced which theories are highlighted in this chapter: first, the values of democracy, such as equality and freedom, are assumed to be important tenets of the type of healthy civic life our society is aspiring to work toward; second, the belief that prosperity for all citizens and communities is the shared goal of civic life; and third, the report assumes that there is a certain threshold for human decency that developed societies and its members are expected to uphold. Without question, there are countless, additional theories that this report could have included, however the following were selected to offer the key frameworks that could deepen our understanding about the current health of civic life.

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM THEORY

Ecological systems theory is rooted in the person-in-environment perspective and “gives equal weight to the individual and to the social environments that do so much to

determine [our] well-being.”³³ In essence, ecological systems theory is a relational perspective where the “person and the environment are unceasingly, intricately, reciprocally sustaining and shaping one another.”³⁴ There is no doubt that the systems model helps to shape our understanding of civic life through its ability to highlight the transactional process between individuals, among individuals and social institutions, and the influence of one’s environment, resources, and culture.

Civic health, like physical health, relies on the adequate functioning of a variety of systems all at once. There is a multiplicity of systems that make up our bodies, such as the circulatory, endocrine, and nervous systems and, at any given point, our bodies will have numerous biological processes going on at once. Like our bodies, our government is comprised of systems as well. “In systems of shared powers, such as the United States, powers are separated among branches. Each branch has primary responsibility for certain functions, but each branch also shares these powers and functions with the others, e.g., the president, Congress, and the Supreme Court all share power over the laws of the nation.”³⁵ One system inevitably affects other systems and like a domino effect, system’s level thinking could help us really identify areas for improving the overall civic health of Texas.

Health in the medical field is often thought of as the state of being free from illness; and therefore, the term “civic health” refers to a similar concept but in regards to our government and political system. The state of our civic “well-being” is determined by how open and reflective our political system is and how well it is doing in meeting the needs of those it serves. A healthy civic system would support individuals engaging in

³³ Social Work Desk Reference. *Meta Theories for Direct Social Work Practice: Critical Ecological Systems Theory*. Pg. 90

³⁴ Ibid. Pg. 91

³⁵ Ibid. <http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=912erica>

the process and would offer adequate means for dealing with social problems. Ecological systems theory's strength lies in its ability to identify the root cause(s) to a problem and excavate areas for valuable change that could mitigate the situation. While at the same time, it is important to note that theorists have also struggled with several concerns about the approach. One being that the perspective is too broad and therefore can become paralyzing to those who attempt to use it as a framework for understanding.³⁶ The second concern is that it is too abstract and that it cannot be properly operationalized for action.

Systems theory has addressed these concerns to some degree by integrating the use of visual mapping as an alternative tool for analysis and identifying areas for action. The *ecomap* has advantages in that it helps researchers visualize complex systems, like civic life, in their entirety and has the potential to even illustrate the health of the transactional process between systems.³⁷ A system can be a micro unit of analysis such as an individual or as large as a macro unit of analysis such as a whole nation. A concept map helps to connect all of disparate pieces of civic life into one unit and can outline assets in a community or identify gaps in its resources. Mapping and data visualization remain to be key tools for communicating and exploring complicated topics like civic life. The use of those tools should be considered and applied when appropriate.

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Positive youth development, another theory important to developing life-long engaged citizens, is sustained and supported by internal and external assets.³⁸ The more assets a young person possesses and has access to, the greater likelihood that the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Hartman, A (1994). Diagrammatic assessment of family relationships. *Social Casework*, 59, pg. 465-476.

³⁸ Sherrod, L. R., Torney-Purta, J., & Flanagan, C. A. (2010). *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth*. Wiley. Pg. 4

individual will experience positive outcomes throughout their lives. Youth who exemplify what positive youth development scholars call “the six C’s: Character, Competence, Confidence, Connection, Caring, and Contribution” are more likely to be productive members of their communities and therefore, be more civically engaged.³⁹

Civic engagement behavior results from a person’s interaction with society and its institutions. School is often one of the first institutions in a young person’s life to offer opportunities to “exercise voice, deliberate and negotiate with fellow group members, and assume responsibility for group projects and the integrity of the institution.”⁴⁰

Political theorist Michael Walzer defines a citizen as “a member of a political community, entitled to whatever prerogatives and encumbered with whatever responsibilities are attached to membership.”⁴¹ Therefore, to develop positive civic competencies and dispositions, youth need opportunities to experience what it means to be a member of a community. Furthermore, positive youth development theory suggests that the development of **civic literacy** (knowledge of community affairs and political issues), **civic skills** (competencies in achieving group goals), and **civic attachment** (feelings or beliefs that the individual matters) are concepts that can be developed in educational settings and significantly contribute to successful life-long engagement.

INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital theory suggests that government and society performs better when civic life and social connectedness is strong.⁴² When this happens, citizens and civic

³⁹ Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K.C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7, 119-128.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Pg. 6

⁴¹ Walzer, M. (1989). *Citizenship*. New York: Cambridge University Press. In *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth*. Wiley. Pg. 6

⁴² Robert Putnam. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

groups are seen as partners, not adversaries in meeting the needs of their communities. In the last 20 years, there has also been substantial progress in our understanding of what social capital is and how it contributes to the growth and sustainability of communities. Social scientists continue to struggle to find a common definition for social capital, but according to Putnam, “social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”⁴³ Fukuyama describes social capital in terms of “cultural values such as degrees of compassion, altruism, and tolerance.”⁴⁴ Social capital benefits society by promoting trust and cooperation, which in turn increases efficient collective action.⁴⁵

Communities with stronger levels of social capital have healthier levels of civic life and have also proved to be more resilient during economic recessions, compared to communities with lower levels of social capital.⁴⁶ The impact of social capital lies in its ability to create more efficient means of production. Similar to the concept of traditional economic capital, the theory suggests that it is “more efficient to invest in producing an intermediate good that in turn becomes an input into the production of a final good, than to produce the final good directly.”⁴⁷ Therefore, by investing in relationships that reduce social costs, theorists suggest you can reduce the resistance commonly found in the production of social goods. In terms of civic health, governments work better when public committees are more trusting and, therefore, more effective; communities are

⁴³ Putnam, R.D., (1995). Tuning in, tuning out: the strange disappearance of social capital in America. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28, 664–683.

⁴⁴ Fukuyama, F., 1995. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. The Free Press, New York.

⁴⁵ La Porta, R., Lopez-de-Silanes, F., Shleifer, A., Vishny, R.W., (1997). *Trust in large organizations*. *American Economic Review* 87, 333–338.

⁴⁶ National Conference on Citizenship. (2012) *Civic Health and Unemployment II: The Case Builds*. Retrieved from <http://ncoc.net/unemployment2>

⁴⁷ Arrow, K., (2000). Observations on Social Capital. In: Dasgupta, P., Serageldin, I. (Eds.), *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*. The World Bank, Washington, DC.

more responsive to citizen needs when they have adequate resources to meet those needs; and individuals are more likely to be motivated to engage if they don't feel as if they are the only one working toward the community's shared prosperity.

Indicators related to building social capital such as volunteering, working with neighbors on a community issue, or attending public meetings have also shown to have positive effects on economic resiliency in communities. By participating in voluntary groups and working on solving problems with peers, "individuals develop skills, motivations, and networks that benefit them in the labor market."⁴⁸ A recent study by the *National Conference on Citizenship* found that "states with high social cohesion had unemployment rates two percentage points lower than their less connected and trusting counterparts, even when controlling for demographics and economic factors."⁴⁹

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: CHOICE AND HABITS

Motivation is also an important concept to civic engagement, but so is the importance of developing positive civic habits. In his pivotal book, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observes how American political institutions lead citizens to see that "it is the duty as well as the interest of men to be useful to their fellows... what had been calculation becomes instinct. By dint of working for the good of his fellow citizens, he in the end acquires a habit and taste for serving them."⁵⁰ Whether our institutions today facilitate the same outcomes as they did during Tocqueville's time is questionable, but what we do know from modern research is that there continues to be a very strong habitual component to civic engagement behavior.

⁴⁸ Mark S. Granovetter. (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 78, no.6 pp.1360-1380.

⁴⁹ Ibid. National Conference on Citizenship.(2012)

⁵⁰ Alexis de De Tocqueville. (1960). *Democracy in America* (Vol. 1). Vintage. Pg. 580

Political scientists Gerber, Green, and Shachar (2003) performed a field experiment involving over 25,000 registered voters and found that voting in one election substantially increased the likelihood of voting in the future.⁵¹ Their research also found that treatment groups who were encouraged to vote either via direct mail or face-to-face canvassing were more likely to vote in the 1988 election. We also know from a large body of research that adolescence is an important period for forming habits that last throughout one's life.⁵² Schools can play an active role in developing those positive behaviors and motivating future generations to engage in civic life.

Joshua Harder and Jon Krosnick suggest in their article, "Why Do People Vote? A Psychological Analysis of the Causes of Voter Turnout" that the choice to vote is a function of one's motivation to vote, the ability to vote and the difficulty of voting. They suggest this equation: Likelihood of voting = (Motivation to Vote x Ability to Vote) / Difficulty of Voting.⁵³ It's an interesting model and is helpful to think of a citizens' behavior being a "joint function of his or her social location, psychological dispositions, the procedures involved in voting, and the events that occur at the time of each election."⁵⁴ We have also seen new tactics used by political campaigns and interest groups that leverage peer pressure to motivate toward engagement. Social media graphics that individuals post online to show that they voted or attended a political event motivate

⁵¹ Gerber, A., Green, D., and Shachar, R. (2003). Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 47, No.3, July 2003, pp. 540-550.

⁵² David Campbell. (2006). *How We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape our Civic Life*. Princeton University Press.

⁵³ Harder, J., & Krosnick, J. A. (2008). Why Do People Vote? A Psychological Analysis of the Causes of Voter Turnout. *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(3), 525-549.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

others to do the same. Research in women studies shows that being directly asked to run for office significantly increase the likelihood that they will seek elected office.⁵⁵

THE PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACE

Plazas are the palaces of the people...I believe that in each plaza, corner to corner and street to street, people reveal themselves. We look at one another face to face; we recognize each other and make ourselves strong.⁵⁶

Public spaces are inherently free, open to any citizen, and help support the production of public and social goods. They are an important element to civic life in that they provide safe spaces for convening and developing social connectedness.⁵⁷ A public space may be a gathering spot or part of a neighborhood, downtown, waterfront or other area within the public realm that helps promote social interaction and a sense of community. Possible examples include town squares, parks, marketplaces, public commons and malls, public greens, piers, or convention centers. Some overarching characteristics of successful public spaces are that they are: safe, welcoming, well-maintained and accommodating; they promote human interaction, community involvement, and social activities; and they reflect the local culture, history, and needs of the community.⁵⁸ Public spaces are where you find families picnicking in the park, where Girl Scout Troops can sell their cookies, and where local volunteer firefighters meet to coordinate services. They are places for us all; however communities have witnessed a shift away from public spaces to more private and corporate worlds.

⁵⁵ Richard L. Fox, and Jennifer L. Lawless. "Entering the arena? Gender and the decision to run for office." *American Journal of Political Science* 48.2 (2004): 264-280.

⁵⁶ A poem by Alfonso Chase in *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*. By Setha M. Low. (2000). The University of Texas Press. Austin, TX.

⁵⁷ Fisher, R. and Karger, H. (1997). *Social Work and Community in a Private World: Getting Out in Public*. Addison Wesley Longman, Inc. White Plains, NY.

⁵⁸ American Planning Association. *Great Places in America: Public Spaces*. Retrieved from: <http://www.planning.org/greatplaces/spaces/characteristics.htm>

Over time, more of Americans have moved further away from city centers into gated neighborhoods or suburban areas, which reproduce the feeling of community in a more sanitized, homogenous way. Time spent watching television or on the Internet continues to increase and perpetuate this shift towards privacy and away from communal time. The focus on privatization is, on one hand, very much a part of our American heritage. Individualism has been a distinctive characteristic of our society since its inception and traditional capitalist theory even proposes a general distrust for government institutions. These aspects are as much a part of who we are, as our love for our public parks, free museums, and civic centers.

We are complex and multifaceted citizens. The theory of the “privatization of public space” is important to keep in mind as we explore the contemporary aspects of civic life in Texas. A call for deeper understanding invites us to question if there are adequate places for citizens to convene, discuss political issues, or organize for action. And if there are not traditional public spaces, is convening happening in nontraditional settings that are not being included in survey questions? The concern with the shift from public to private spaces is that the groups and individuals who rely heavily on these spaces are being pushed to the sidelines or worse, forgotten. It might be fine to move to a more suburban area and participate in community activities in your own neighborhood, but for the citizen who can’t move the activities that take place in urban public spaces still matter. Striking a healthy balance is vital to the long-term wellbeing of our citizens and acknowledging the positive role that public spaces play in promoting and sustaining civic life.

Chapter 3: Who is Texas?

Low levels of civic engagement isn't unique to Texas, yet in order to fully understand the dynamics of its civic life, one does need to understand what makes the state like no other. Civic life in Texas is dynamic and influenced by a variety of social, geographic, economic, and institutional factors. Texas is known for its size and its sometimes boastful distinctiveness. Texans are rugged, simple, and straightforward. They hold on to strong beliefs, value tradition, respect authority, embrace competition and have a survival-of-the-fittest attitude about life.⁵⁹ The state is home to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as well as to a variety of cattle, cotton, oil, and BBQ. Texas has not only bred some of the nation's most notable statesmen like former Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush; but has been home to several unforgettable political actors such as Governor Ann Richards, U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, and U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. Although Texas is often seen as a conservative stronghold, the state now leads the nation in production of wind power,⁶⁰ a leading source of clean, sustainable energy.

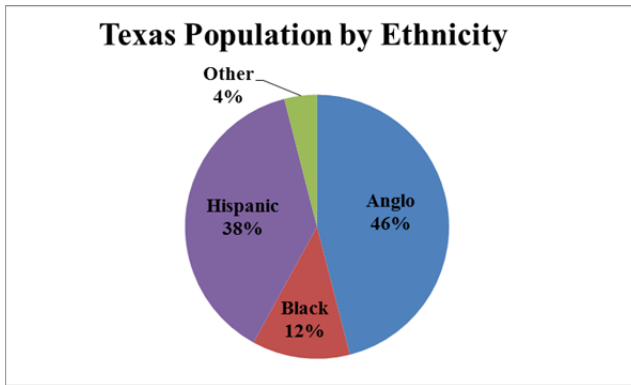
If citizenship is a social construct then there is the possibility that its meaning is different for each individual person. Factors that play a role in shaping our individual social constructs are the environment in which we live, the availability of basic resources, and the culture which influences our surroundings. Texas as a state is large, regionally expansive and diverse in its races, ethnicities, backgrounds, and lifestyles. Texas is the second most populous state in the United States with a population of over 25 million

⁵⁹ Texas Politics Project. *Texas Political Culture*. Retrieved from:
http://texaspolitics.laits.utexas.edu/10_1_0.html

⁶⁰ American Wind Energy Association. Retrieved from 2012 Report:
<http://www.awea.org/learnabout/publications/reports/AWEA-US-Wind-Industry-Market-Reports.cfm>

residents.⁶¹ Of the residents in Texas, approximately 12.8 million are young (ages 34 years or under) which accounts for about 51% of Texas’s total population. Forty-six percent of Texans reported their ethnicity to be White/Non-Hispanic, 38% Hispanic/Latino, 12% African-American, and 4% were Asian or Native American.

Figure 2: Texas’ Population by Ethnicity ⁶²



One of the more historic aspects of Texas’ demographics right now is the widespread growth in the state’s population. Since 2004, Texas has been considered to be a “minority-majority state” meaning that the sum

of the minority populations is larger than sum of the traditionally larger White/Non-Hispanic population in Texas. It’s a shift that could influence a majority of the state’s institutions, systems, and structures.

From 2010 to 2011, the state added more people than any other state in the country, which accounted for nearly 19 percent of the whole nation’s population growth for the year.⁶³ From 2000 to 2010, Texas’ Hispanic population increased by 42%, and the state’s White and Black population grew by 20% and 24%, respectively. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that there are 9.4 million Hispanic or Latino residents in Texas accounting for 38% of the total statewide population. Eight million residents (of the 9.4

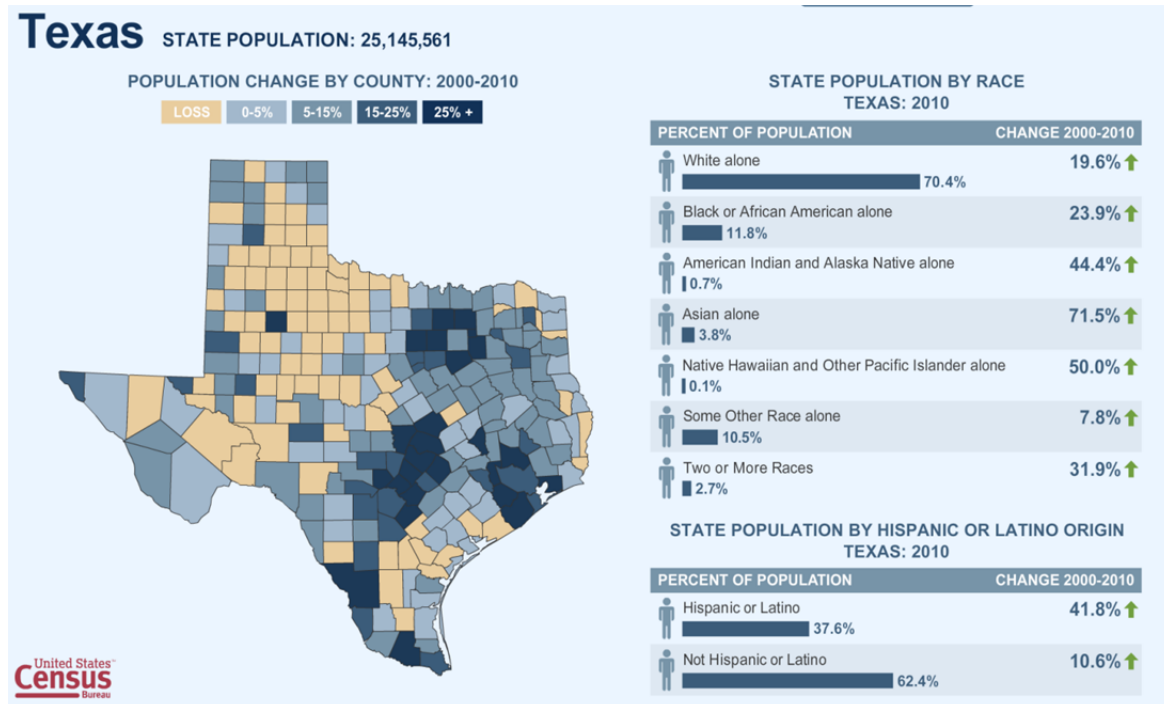
61 U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census of Population and Housing, Demographic Profile Summary File: Technical Documentation, 2011.

62 Adapted from Texas Department of State Health Services, Center for Health Statistics. Available at <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/chs/popdat/ST2010.shtm>

63 The Texas Economy. Office of Texas Comptroller. Economic Outlook. Retrieved from: <http://www.thetexaseconomy.org/economic-outlook/>

million Hispanic Texans) are of Mexican descent, 4.3 percent are from El Salvador, and 3.9 percent are of Indian descent.⁶⁴

Figure 3: Texas' Population and Changing Demographics ⁶⁵



Population change has increased among every racial category according to the 2010 U.S Census, with Asian-Americans experiencing the largest population growth (72%) comparatively.⁶⁶ Regions such as Dallas, Houston, Austin, and San Antonio are experiencing growing populations and expansion that is garnering national attention from scholars, journalists, social scientists, and demographers.

⁶⁴ Migration Policy Institute. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/state.cfm?ID=tx>.

⁶⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from: <http://www.census.gov/2010census/data/>

⁶⁶ Ibid.



Figure 4: Counties in Texas ⁶⁷

There are 254 counties in the state, which is the largest number in one state in the country.

For example, Rockwall County comprises only 127 square miles within its borders, yet is home to approximately 78,000 residents; while Hudspeth County includes 571 square miles, but only has 3,476 residents. Texas has large rural areas with small populations and small metropolitan areas with huge, growing populations (like Travis County, with 990 square miles and over one million residents).⁶⁸

Texas' overall poverty rate (18.5%) is higher than the national poverty rate (15.9%), with 4.6 million Texas residents living below the federal poverty guidelines for their family size.⁶⁹ "Point-in-Time" estimates from the Texas Homeless Network counted 11,229 homeless residents on a single day in the year, with estimates closer to 14,000 for those who might fall into homelessness in one year.⁷⁰ In addition, there are 1.8 million children in Texas living in poverty, which accounts for 26.6% of the state's population under 18 years old. The national child poverty rate is 22.5%. Sixty percent of all students in the Texas public school system are considered economically disadvantaged.⁷¹

⁶⁷ National Association of Counties. Available: <http://www.naco.org/Counties/Pages/FindACounty.aspx>

⁶⁸ Ibid.

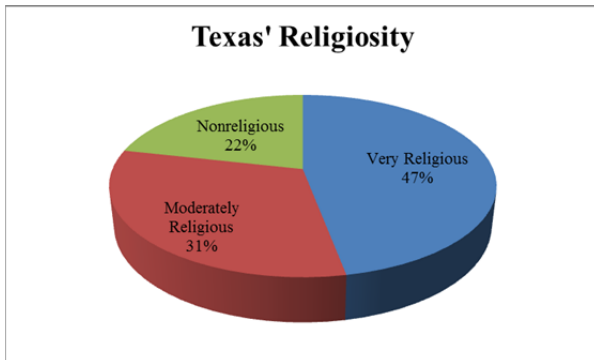
⁶⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey, 2011, 1-year estimate

⁷⁰ Samuels, E. and Fiero, K. *Texas Balance of State 2010 Summary Report*. Texas Homeless Network. Retrieved from <http://thn.squarespace.com/kb/balance-of-state-continuum-of-care/assessment/community-reports/>

⁷¹ Texas Education Agency. 2011-2012 Texas Public School Statistics: Pocket Edition. February 2013. Available at www.tea.state.tx.us/communications/pocket-edition/

In 2010, approximately 20.7 percent of Texans experienced poor physical or mental health issues for five or more days.⁷² Thirty-two percent of adults and 16 percent of youth are considered obese and are more prone to difficult health conditions. The U.S. Census Bureau's *American Community Survey* found that 5.8 million Texans, 23 percent of the population, did not have health insurance in 2011. That included 13% of children, 22% of women, 24% of men and 26% of the employed workforce in Texas.

Figure 5: Religion and Civic Life



According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau's religion supplement, Texans are more religious than the national average with at least 56% of Texans observing a religion (the national average is 48.8 percent).⁷³ A 2012 Gallup

poll found similar trends in that 47% of state residents reported that "religion is very important in their lives and that they attend church weekly or nearly weekly".⁷⁴ With many residents reporting as well that 31% consider themselves "moderately religious," it would be accurate to assume that a majority of Texans see religious values as important aspects of their lives. Texas is home to the largest number of Evangelical Protestants in

⁷² Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, Center for Health Statistics, Texas Department of State Health Services. Retrieved from: http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/chs/brfss/query/brfss_form.shtm

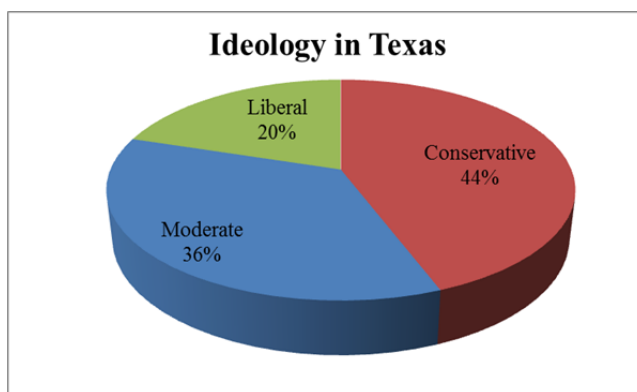
⁷³ U.S. Census Bureau. 2010 U.S. Religion Census. Retrieved from: <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/population/religion.html>

⁷⁴ Gallup, Inc. U.S. State Religion and Society Data, 2012. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125066/State-States.aspx>

the nation and has over 10.6 million residents who claim membership in the Methodist, Baptist, or Catholic Churches.⁷⁵

Political culture, history, and ideology also play a major role in shaping our beliefs and behaviors about civic life and social wellbeing. Political culture is a term that refers to the “orientations a population possesses towards its political institutions, conventions and traditions.”⁷⁶ Texas’ political culture is often thought of as being shaped by both individual and traditionalist values. “Texas’s traditionalistic political culture is represented in the state’s long history as a one-party state, low levels of voter turnout, and social and economic conservatism,” says Neal Tannahill in his textbook *American and Texas Government*.⁷⁷ Daniel Elazar identifies the state’s “strong support for private business, opposition to big government, and faith in individual initiative as reflections of Texas’s individualistic political culture.”⁷⁸

Figure 6: Political Ideology in Texas



Furthermore, Elazar suggests that the trends we see over time in civic life represent the deferment of power by citizens to the ruling elite (a traditionalist framework) or to special interests (individualist framework).⁷⁹

A 2012 Gallup poll showed that in Texas, 44% of respondents identify as having

⁷⁵ Texas State Historical Association. Texas Almanac. Retrieved from: <http://www.texasalmanac.com/topics/religion>

⁷⁶ G. A. Almond. (Ed.). (1989). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. SAGE Publications, Incorporated.

⁷⁷ Neal Tannahill. (2010). *American and Texas Government: Policy and Politics* (10th Edition). Pearson.

⁷⁸ Daniel Judah Elazar. *American Federalism: A View from the States*. New York: Crowell, 1966.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

conservative ideology, 36% reported having moderate political beliefs, and 20% reported liberal.⁸⁰ This would demonstrate that almost 80% of residents in the state report to be either conservative or moderate in their political ideology.

However, it hasn't always been this way. From Reconstruction through the mid-1960s, Texas was a firmly Democratic state; however, over the past two decades in particular, Texas politics has been marked by "Republican Party resurgence and Democratic Party decline."⁸¹ Texas has not been a battleground state in a presidential election since the 1970s and a reporter recently even commented that the "presidential race in Texas might as well have been in Mexico, so little did the Democrats campaign for the state's 38 electoral seats."⁸² An interesting aspect of Texas' particular political culture in recent years is that single party dominance over time has led to party primaries having greater influence and turnout compared to other states with more ideological diversity. The recent 2010 Republican gubernatorial primary is a perfect example, where a hotly contested race between incumbent Governor Rick Perry and former U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison appealed to over 1.5 million Republican voters statewide.⁸³ These dynamics shape the political messages that Texas residents receive and influence the behaviors and specific calls to action that mobilize citizens to engage in the process.

⁸⁰ Gallup. U.S. State Political Data, 2012. Retrieved from: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125066/State-States.aspx>

⁸¹ Texas Politics, "Party Identification in Texas." Retrieved from http://texaspolitics.laits.utexas.edu/6_6_2.html

⁸² Richard Parker, "Lone Star Blues," *New York Times*, February 13, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/20/opinion/getting-texas-to-go-democratic.html?smid=pl-share&_r=0

⁸³ Texas Secretary of State's Office. <http://elections.sos.state.tx.us/elchist.exe>; and Ross Ramsey, "Troubled Texas Primaries Could Well Be Decided by the 8 Percent," *New York Times* February 17, 2012, Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/17/us/politics/texas-primaries-are-likely-to-suffer-from-low-voter-turnout.html>

CIVIC EDUCATION IN TEXAS

The Texas public school system consists of 1,227 school districts and charters, 8,500 campuses, 324,000 teachers, and 5 million students.⁸⁴ Half of the students in the Texas school system are Hispanic (51%). Whites (31%), African Americans (13%) and Asian Americans (4%) make up a majority of the remaining half of the student population.

In Texas, students are required to take a total of three years of civic-related courses in U.S. history, civics/government, economics, and world history or geography.⁸⁵ State standards in social studies and civics include: *Time, Continuity, & Change; Power, Authority & Governance; People, Places and Environments; Science, Technology & Society; Civic Ideals and Practices; Culture & Diversity; Real World Application; Production, Distribution and Consumption; Global Connections; and Individuals, Groups and Institutions.*⁸⁶ The only standard that Texas has not adopted, but other states have is the *Individual Development and Identity* social studies standard.⁸⁷ Texas is one of nine states in the United States where students are required to take a multiple-choice state assessment in generalist social-studies knowledge.⁸⁸ In Texas students are required to take the assessment in both eight grade and in high school prior to graduation.⁸⁹ The state

⁸⁴ Texas Education Agency. 2011-2012 Texas Public School Statistics: Pocket Edition. February 2013. Available at www.tea.state.tx.us/communications/pocket-edition/

⁸⁵ Texas Education Code. Chapter 74. Curriculum Requirements Subchapter G. Graduation Requirements, Beginning with School Year 2012-2013 Retrieved from: <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter074/ch074g.html>

⁸⁶ Texas Education Code. Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies Subchapter C. High School. Retrieved from <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/ch113c.html>

⁸⁷ CIRCLE. State Civic Education Requirements. (2012) Retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Texas Education Agency. Social Studies Frequently Asked Questions. November 2011. Retrieved from: www.tea.state.tx.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=2147504490&libID=2147504485

outlines several descriptors, but there is no mandate for any civics standards to be included in the assessments.⁹⁰

There is no requirement for service learning to be a part of the social-studies standards or assessment either.⁹¹ Service learning is a “teaching strategy through which students apply what they’re learning in school to identify research and address community needs. Service learning enhances learning, builds character, and develops a sense of civic responsibility while improving schools and strengthening communities.”⁹² Possible service learning curriculum standards include *reflection; diversity; youth voice; partnerships; and progress monitoring evaluation*.⁹³ Educational attainment is a significant indicator leading toward civic engagement behavior and with only 17.7% of the population (25 years and older) with a bachelor’s degree, Texas has a long way to go.

THE TEXAS ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Texas operates a decentralized system for elections. The Secretary of State office serves as the chief election office of the state and is required to “maintain uniformity in elections and advise and assist local officials who actually conduct elections.”⁹⁴ Each of the 254 counties in Texas is officially charged with conducting elections and maintaining official lists of registered voters. The voter registrar is generally either the tax-assessor collector or an election administrator working for the county. The county political parties conduct primary elections and the county chair serves as the chief elections official in

⁹⁰ State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR™) Performance Level Descriptors U.S. History Since 1877. Retrieved from

www.tea.state.tx.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=2147506450&libID=2147506443

⁹¹ Texas Education Agency. TAKS High School Graduation Requirements. Retrieved from http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3286&menu_id=793

⁹² Service Learning Texas. What is service learning? Retrieved from <http://www.servicelearningtexas.org/>

⁹³ Education Commission of the States. Service Learning/Community Service in Standards and/or Frameworks. August 2011. Retrieved from

<http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquest?SID=a0i70000000wbyv&Rep=SL02&Q=Q0763>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

that situation. Other elections are conducted by joint agreements between political subdivisions (like a city or school district) or with the city's respective county.

The Texas Secretary of State's office houses and maintains the Texas Voter Registration Online System (TVRS) which is a voluntary, online, centralized voter registration system created in 2002 in accordance with the *Help America Vote Act* signed into law by former President George W. Bush.⁹⁵ A 2005 report by the former Secretary of State, Geoffrey Conner, stated that 164 of the 254 counties currently used the voluntary system.⁹⁶ In 2013, the current votetexas.org website states that now over 200 counties are using the Texas Election Administration Management (TEAM) system, formally Texas Voter Registration Online System (TVRS) to track voter registration in Texas.

Another important feature to the voting system in Texas is that the state is covered under Section five of the federal Voting Rights Act. The law requires any change in the election process to be submitted to the Voting Section of the U.S. Department of Justice for review prior to enforcing the change. At the state level, the Secretary of State's office submits changes; however at the local level, each county must submit its own changes to the Department of Justice and examples include changes to polling locations or the adoption of new voting systems.

Political scientists argue that noncompetitive elections in Texas contribute to low civic engagement. Not only would Texas' decentralized voting system seem difficult to conquer, the sheer size of Texas would make you shudder at the cost of effectively campaigning in the region. There are 20 media markets in Texas, compared to California

⁹⁵ United State Election Commission. *Help America Vote Act*. Retrieved from: http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/workflow_staging/Page/41.PDF

⁹⁶ Texas Secretary of State. *Current Help America Vote Act Plan*. Retrieved from: http://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/hava/hava_act.shtml

(with 14) and Ohio (with 12), which means that marketing statewide is on a considerably different scale than the other 49 states in our nation.⁹⁷

For presidential political campaigns, strategists must calculate the costs and benefits of engaging in Texas. As one might imagine, even though the 38 Electoral College votes are enticing, it would take a substantial investment to garner any return. Furthermore, for statewide campaigns or organized issue groups, the number of media markets and the cost of disseminating one's message is an often an unreachable goal. Groups with smaller resources are forced to choose regions to focus on instead of being able to engage on a statewide level. Therefore, national campaigns often leave Texas alone and campaigns offer citizens political messages that vary across the state.

⁹⁷ TV Media Market Map. 2006-2007 Season. Retrieved from: <http://www.dishuser.com/TVMarkets/>

Chapter 4: What Our Indicators Tell Us about Texas

Indicators are tools that can help us analyze needs in the community, see where we are succeeding or where we need to improve, and make decisions based on good evidence. Civic indicators deepen our understanding and provide a basis for comparison among groups and with the nation. This report will cover several key indicators that have shown to be factors in the health of civic life such as **political participation** (e.g. voting and contacting public officials), **civic involvement** (such as donating, volunteering, and belonging to organized groups), and **social connectedness** (such as trust in neighbors and exchanging favors with friends).⁹⁸ This report seeks to put the question of Texas' civic health in context by examining the overall rates of these activities, making comparisons to national trends, and by highlighting factors shown to be correlated with civic engagement such as income, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, and age.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The health of our democratic system requires that citizens participate in electing our representatives and do their part to ensure that those officials are aware of the concerns of their constituents. Political participation remains a vital aspect of civic life and includes activities such as voting, contacting our elected officials and participating in public demonstrations. Historically, Americans have exhibited low levels of these forms of traditional engagement, so the problem might not be unique to Texas. Regardless, the state continues to hold some of the lowest rankings across several of these indicators when data is compared nationally.

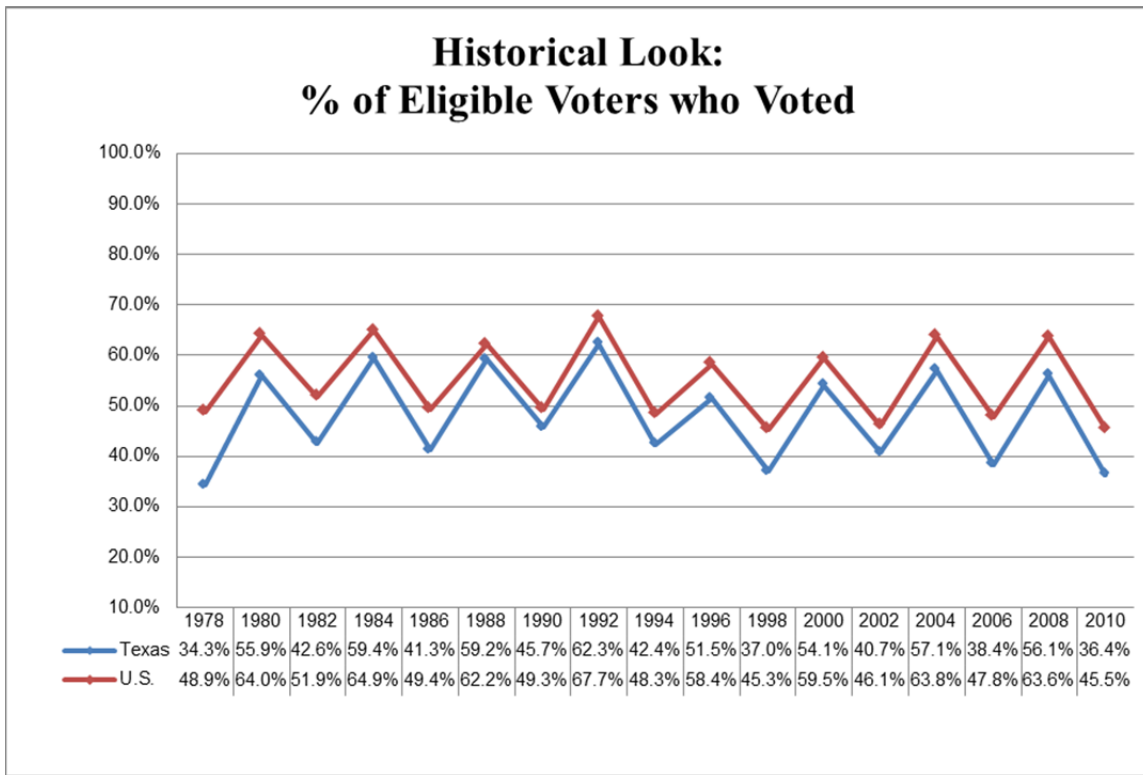
⁹⁸ United States Census Bureau. Current Population Survey (CPS). A Joint Effort Between the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau. Available at <http://www.census.gov/cps/>

Voter Registration and Turnout

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau ranked Texas 51st among the 50 states and Washington DC in terms of voter turnout, with a rate of 36.4% for eligible citizens aged 18 and over. This places Texas almost 10 percentage points behind the national average of 45.5% of eligible citizens who voted in the same year.⁹⁹ Voting rates in Texas have remained between 35% and 45% in midterm election years and 51% to 62% during presidential election years. It is important to note that this trend is seen throughout the whole nation, not just in Texas. Rates for midterm elections (see 2002, 2006, 2010) are below those for presidential election years (see 2000, 2004, 2008).

⁹⁹ United States Census Bureau. Current Population Survey (CPS). A Joint Effort Between the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau. Available at <http://www.census.gov/cps/>

Figure 7: Historical Look at Voting Trends in Texas ¹⁰⁰



What is also striking is that 61.6% of eligible Texans have reported they are indeed registered to vote. With more than a 25 percentage point difference between those reporting to be registered and those who actually turnout on election, it would be accurate to assume that Texas does not necessarily have a voter registration problem, but rather a *voter turnout* problem. Statistically speaking, based on the 2010 midterm elections, we see a 41% decrease from those who are registered to vote and those who actually show up on Election Day at the polls.¹⁰¹ Approximately 26% of respondents cited that they were too busy or had conflicting work or school schedules that prevented them from voting.

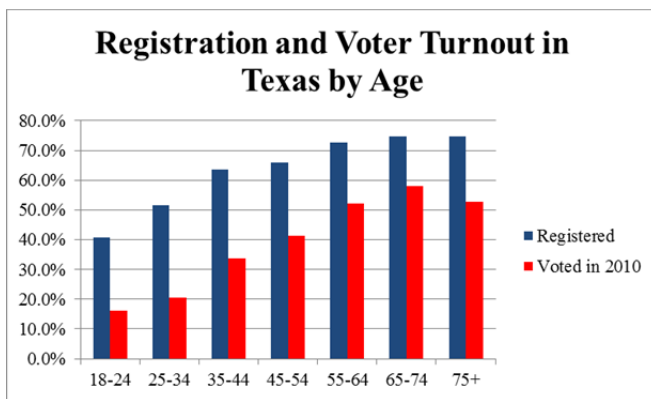
¹⁰⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/>

¹⁰¹ Voter turnout, 2010 = 36.4%; Registered voters, 2010 = 61.6% therefore, $\{[(364/100)-(616/100)] / (616/100)\} \times 100 = -40.9091$

Sixteen percent said they were not interested or felt their vote wouldn't make a difference and 12% mentioned an illness or disability in their family. Other reasons included: citizen reporting to have been out of town, didn't like the candidates or issues, simply forgetting to vote, experiencing registration/voting problem, or having issues with transportation.

Civic engagement in general is more likely to increase as citizens grow older and settle into their adult roles. Older citizens are more likely to be paying more taxes, interacting more frequently with a variety of social institutions, and have higher stakes in what happens in the areas in which they live.

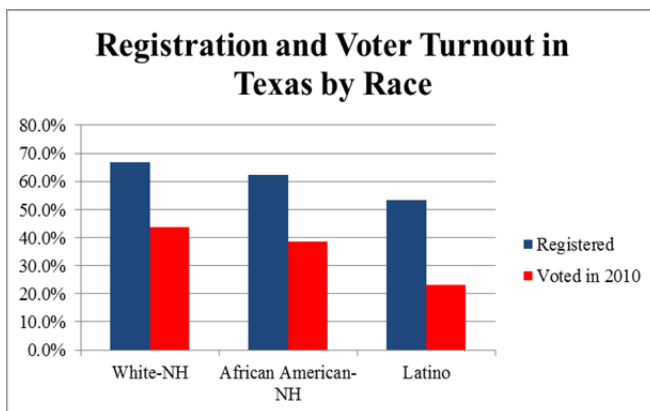
Figure 8: Registration and Voter Turnout by Age



The graph illustrates a clear trend showing that older citizens in Texas are registering and voting at higher rates than their younger counterparts. There is also a smaller gap between those who are registered to vote and

those who reported showing up at the polls for older generations.

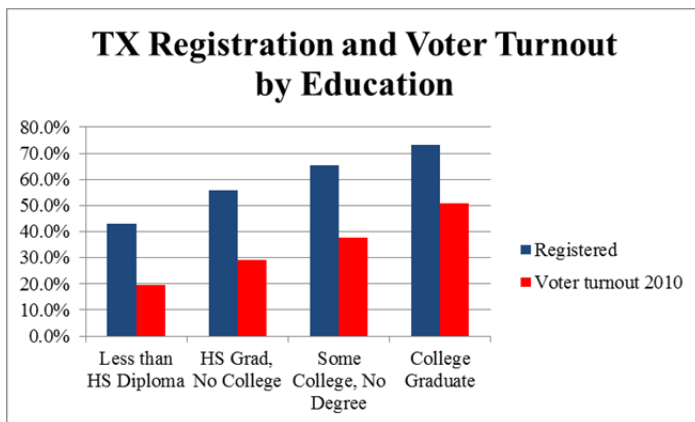
Figure 9: Registration and Voter Turnout by Race



Race can also serve as a key indicator for understanding civic engagement in Texas. In the case of Texas, we see that Hispanic/Latino identified citizens registered and voted at lower rates than their

White/Non-Hispanic or African-American peers.¹⁰² Compared to other groups, citizens who are Hispanic reported engaging in political activities almost 20 percentage points lower than their non-Hispanic counterparts. Things to consider when thinking about this data include the immigration status of the respondent, year of entry to the United States if the respondent did immigrate to the country, whether the parents of the respondent were born outside of the U.S. or not, and their country of origin. Dynamics like these can significantly contribute to a citizen’s beliefs about the role of a citizen, values surrounding their civic duty, and the appropriate expression of civic behaviors.

Figure 10: Registration and Voter Turnout by Education

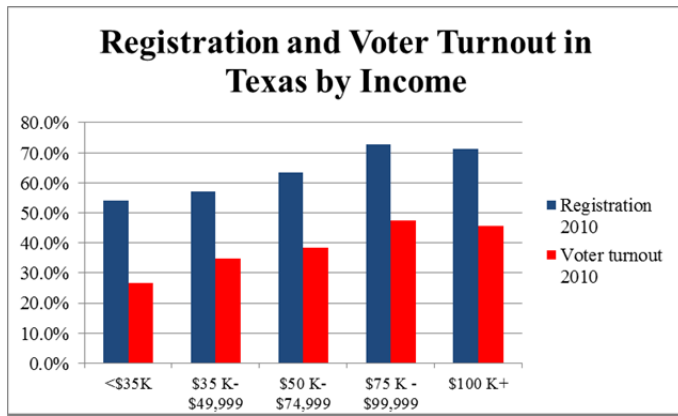


In Texas and in the nation as a whole, we see a trend connecting the level of education a citizen has to their self-reported voting and registration rates. Significant differences in Texas occur between college graduates

and citizens with less than a high school diploma, where data shows a 19% decrease between the voting behavior of college graduates than those with less than a high school diploma.

¹⁰² Asian and Native Americans groups are not explicitly included due to the small sample size.

Figure 11: Registration and Voter Turnout by Income



Income, for a variety of reasons, has also shown to be a key indicator that helps to deepen our understanding of civic health. In Texas, citizens who have a yearly household income of over \$75,000 vote at a rate of 20.6

percentage points higher than those making the lowest yearly income, which is a 44% decrease between the income groups.¹⁰³

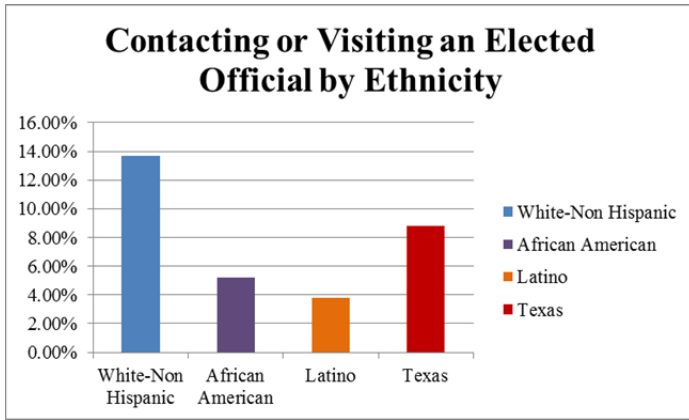
Contacting or Visiting Public Officials

There are many ways, other than voting, that citizens can influence the process. Traditional examples include signing petitions, joining community groups, task forces, or organizing demonstration rallies. However, one of the easiest ways to get one’s voice heard is to contact or visit a public official. As representatives of the people, elected officials have a responsibility to the constituents they serve and have a vested interest in remaining connected to the pulse of the people. In Texas, however, only 8.8% of citizens reported that they contacted or visited a public official in 2010.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Voter turnout, 2010 for \$75K+ = 47.3%; Voter turnout, 2010 for <\$35K+ = 26.7%; therefore, $\{[(267/100)-(473/100)]-(47.3/100)\} / (473/100) \times 100 = -43.55$

¹⁰⁴ Pooled 2009-2011 CPS data.

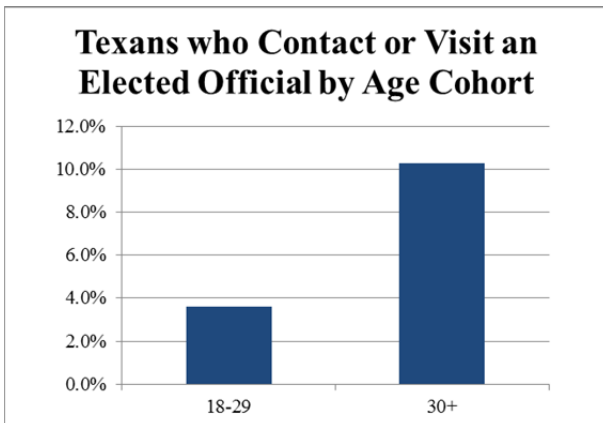
Figure 12: Contacting or Visiting Public Officials by Ethnicity



Stark variations are shown when the data is analyzed based on subcategory. Data shows that among ethnic groups, White/non-Hispanic citizen's reported to have contacted their public officials not only more

than any other racial group in Texas, but more than the total statewide percentage as well. This means that in 2010, Texas' elected officials heard more from White/non-Hispanic citizens, than African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic/Latino residents combined.

Figure 13: Contacting or Visiting Public Officials by Age

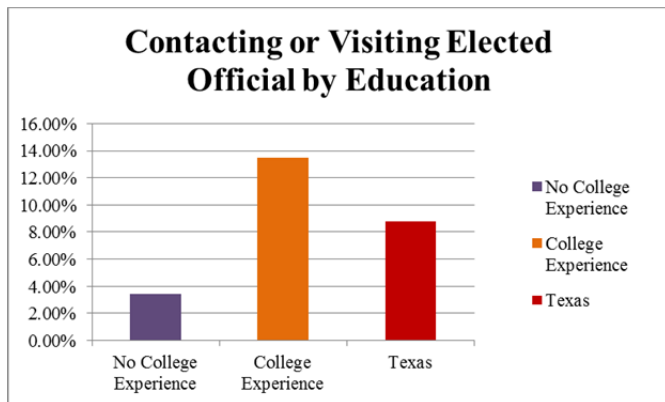


Differences among age cohorts are apparent as well, with only 3.6% of 18-29 year olds reporting that they contacted or visited a public official, compared to 10.3% of citizens aged 30 years and older. When you break the data into seven age categories, the variation is even clearer. Citizens in the

age bracket 55-74 years old contacted a public official at a rate of 13%, compared to the 3.6% of 18-29 year old in Texas. Therefore, it would stand to reason that policy more often reflects the interests of older citizens because they tend to be more likely to contact

their elected officials; however, it is important to note that there are some representatives who acknowledge this predicament and are trying to address it. During the 83rd Texas Legislative Session, State Representative Eric Johnson worked to form the bipartisan *Young Texans Legislative Caucus*. The Caucus includes members from the Texas House of Representatives dedicated to focusing on issues that are important to the state's younger residents. All members are either 40 years of age or younger, or they represent a district with a percentage of young residents greater than the state average. It is uncertain what the effects of this initiative will have on civic life for young people; however it would be reasonable to assume that there now is an additional avenue for young people to get their voices heard and for the issues most important to them to receive greater attention.

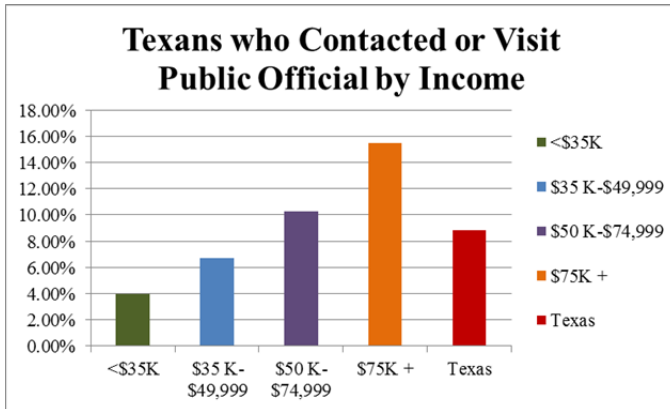
Figure 14: Contacting or Visiting Public Officials by Education



Disparities among subgroup also align with educational attainment. Citizens who reported some college experience contacted or visited their elected officials at significantly higher rates than their

peers with no college experience. Citizens with some college experience also contacted their officials at a higher rate than the total statewide average.

Figure 15: Contacting or Visiting Public Officials by Income



Income is also a salient factor in terms of engagement with public officials. Data show that as yearly household earnings increase, so does the likelihood that a Texan will contact or visit a public official. Other indicators showed

that only four-and-a-half percent of Texans who are unemployed reported contacting their elected officials compared to 10% of citizens who are employed. Marital status showed similar trends, with only 5% of single, non-married citizens contacting their public officials compared to 10.9% of citizens who were married. Data also hints that military service might have a positive effect on one’s willingness to contact a representative because 13.8% of citizens who had served in the military reported contacting an elected official, compared to 8.3% from citizens with no military service experience.

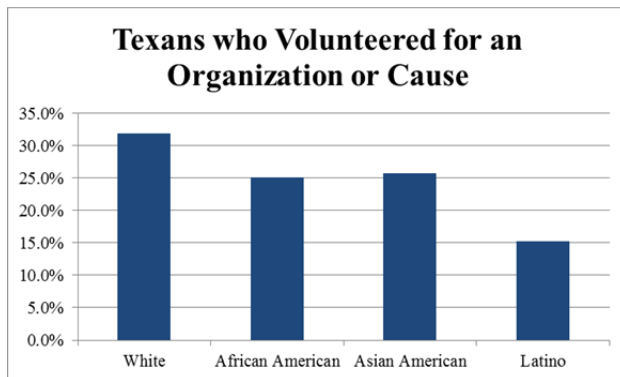
CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

Traditional notions of civic engagement that focus directly on political engagement, such as voting and contacting elected officials are vital to the function of our system, but aren’t the only way that citizens can support civic life. Today our state faces a number of complex challenges and the magnitude of the problems call for us to consider how we can each contribute. Civic involvement includes activities such as volunteering, donating, and participating in a community group or association.

Volunteering

Volunteering has proven to not only positively benefit the individual who volunteers (from increased satisfaction and a sense of giving back to one's community) but serves as a key component to our social safety net. In Texas, 24.7 percent reported that they had volunteered within the last year for an organization or cause.

Figure 16: Texans who Volunteered by Ethnicity



Respondents also varied slightly among ethnic groups with White, African American, and Asian Americans reporting higher rates of volunteerism compared to residents of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. This data

also shows that rates of volunteerism among those who had at least one parent born in the United States are similar to the statewide average (27.2%) compared to volunteerism rates of residents with one parent who was born outside of the country (18.7%).

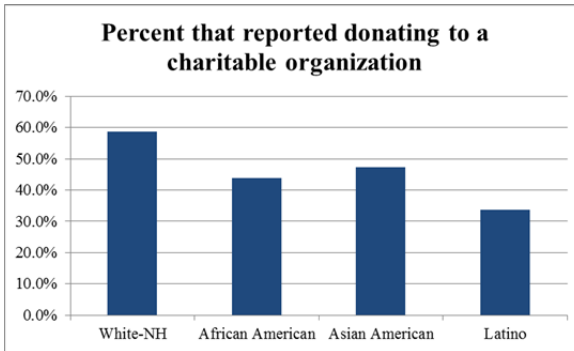
Hispanic/Latino residents in Texas are more likely to have at least one foreign-born parent and this factor might contribute to the variation in self-reported volunteerism among ethnic groups.

Residents with at least some college experience reported significantly higher rates of volunteerism in Texas than those who had no college experience (34.5% vs. 14.8%). Differences also existed for residents with smaller annual income who volunteered at lower rates than those residents with the highest yearly income (16.7% vs. 39.2%).

Donating

Forty-seven percent of respondents in Texas reported to the U.S. Census Bureau that they had donated more than \$25 during the last 12 months to a charitable or religious organization. Women reported donating (51.1%) more often than men (43.3%). Residents with some college experience also donated (60%) at higher rates than those with no college experience (34.4%).

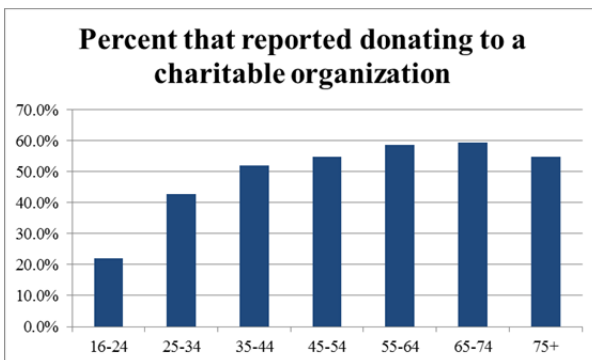
Figure 17: Donating to Charitable Organization by Ethnicity



There were also slight variations among different ethnic groups, with White/Non-Hispanic and Asian-American residents reporting donating at slightly higher rates than African-American or Hispanic/Latino ethnic groups. Texas'

residents with the largest yearly income donated at higher rates (69.4%) than citizens with the lowest yearly income (33.3%). Age also proved to be an interesting indicator, with younger generations donating less during the past 12 months than their older counterparts.

Figure 18: Donating to Charitable Organization by Age Cohort



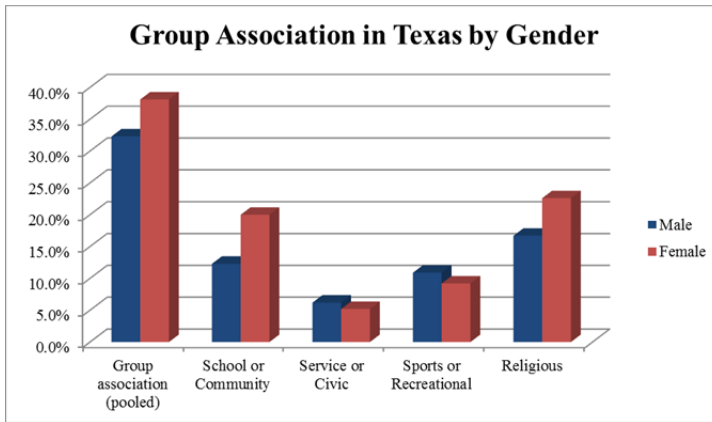
When citizens are young, they tend to have less certainty in about their acquired wealth (i.e. working hourly jobs, instead of salaried) and are often times more transient and not tied down to

a particular location. Older adults have a better understanding of their financial outlook and can make more informed decisions about whether or not to donate. Also in the United States, younger adults still rely on support from their parents or other family members, have student loan or car payments to cover each month, and/or are trying to save to purchase a home. These factors might play a significant role in the likelihood that younger generations donate to a charitable organization or cause.

Group Association

In 2010, 35% of Texans reported to have participated as a member of a group such as a school, neighborhood, or community association, like a parent-teacher association or neighborhood watch group. Only 9% of Texans reported taking up leadership roles in the community as an officer or on a committee. And 7.8% of the state residents had attended a public meeting where there was discussion of community affairs. The Census survey asked specifically what types of groups the respondents were associated with, such as a service or civic organization like the American Legion or Lions Club; a sports or recreation organization like a soccer or tennis club; a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious institution, not including attendance at religious services; and if there was any other type of organization that was not mentioned.

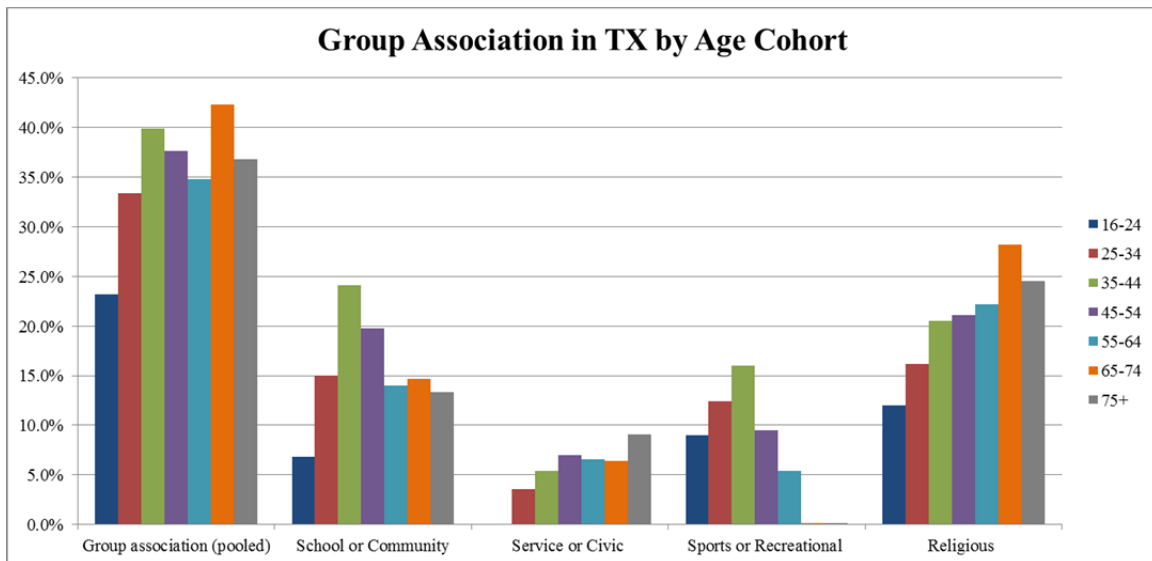
Figure 19: Group Association by Gender



Women in Texas reported to be associated with a group more often than men when each of the categories were pooled together. Women reported that they joined religious, school, and

community group associations, while men indicated that they were slightly more involved in service, civic, sports, and recreational groups.

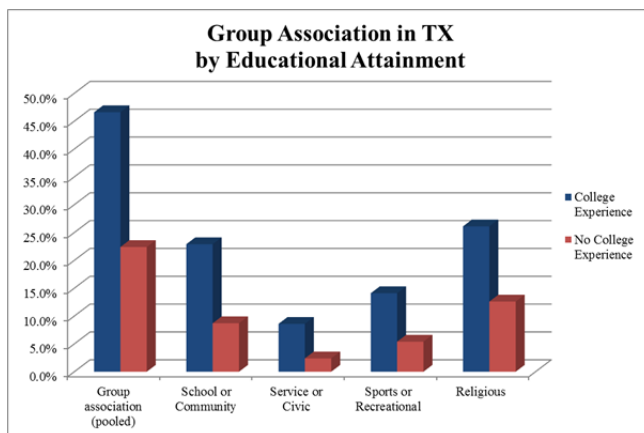
Figure 20: Group Association by Age Cohort



Age groups also show differences, with citizens aged 65-74 reporting more group involvement than all of the other age cohorts and showed significantly higher levels of involvement in religious groups than any other form of civic association. The second age cohort with the highest rates of group association was citizens aged 35-44, who appear to

be active in school, community, sports, and recreation groups. Age groups also show differences, with citizens aged 65-74 reporting more group involvement than all of the other age cohorts and showed significantly higher levels of involvement in religious groups than any other form of civic association. The second age cohort with the highest rates of group association was citizens aged 35-44, who appear to be active in school, community, sports, and recreation groups.

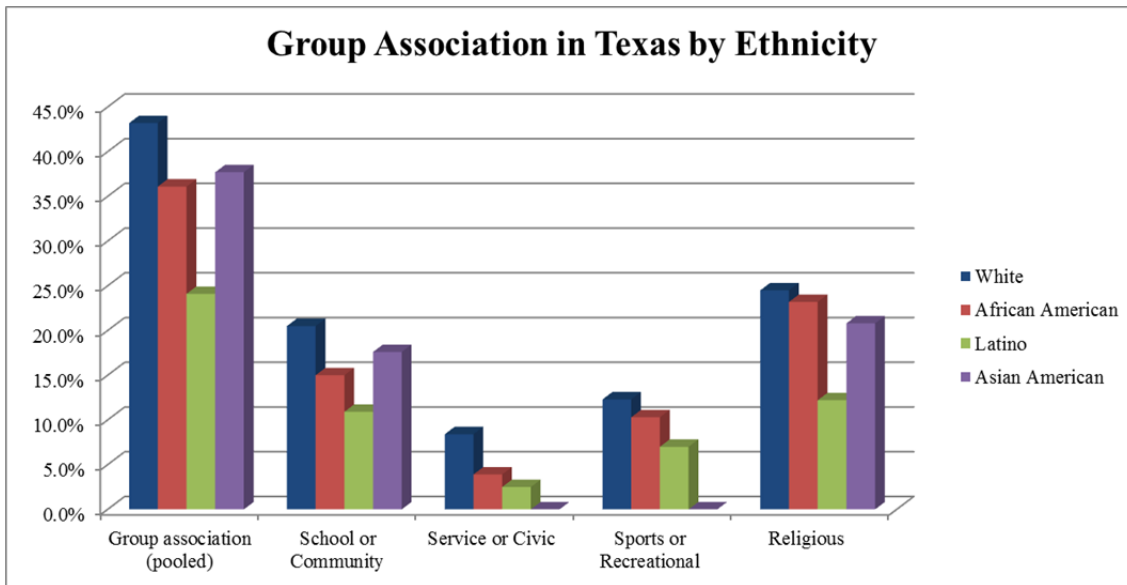
Figure 21: Group Association by Educational Attainment



Education also proved to have an effect on the likelihood of group association; with 45% of citizens with some college experience reported being involved in a group, compared to 20% with no college experience. Similar to the age indicators, citizens in both education-

attainment categories were more involved in religious, school and community groups, compared to civic or sports groups. Involvement in religious organizations was reported to be the mostly likely form of group association for citizen with no college experience.

Figure 22: Group Association by Ethnicity



Variations among ethnic groups also appear in the U.S. Census data, with White/Non-Hispanic residents reporting higher involvement in groups than any other race category. Asian-Americans were the second involved group, with African-Americans closely behind. However, data indicates that Hispanic/Latino residents reported lower levels of group association, both in the pooled and specific categories.

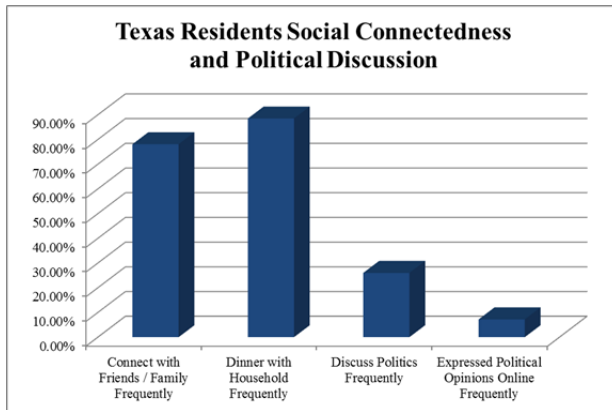
SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

The third category of indicators that the U.S. Census Bureau included was on topics of social connectedness, including how often respondents connected with family and friends, had dinner with members of their household, exchanged favors with their neighbors, and expressed their opinions online. These indicators are included because they shed light on the state of our social fabric, i.e. the levels of trust and confidence in our communities and social institutions.

Eighty-nine percent of Texas residents said that they frequently had dinner with members of their household. Seventy-eight percent said that they frequently saw or heard

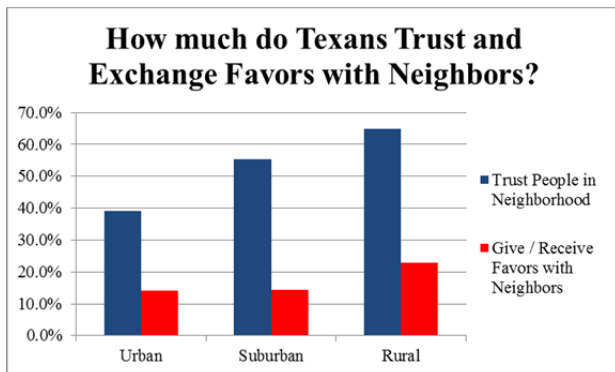
from friends. Females tended to see or hear from friends or family more frequently (81%) than men (74%), while men reported discussing politics more frequently compared to women (30% vs. 23%). Statewide, only 7.2% of residents cited expressing political opinions frequently on the Internet.

Figure 23: Social Connectedness and Political Discussion



Interestingly to the topic of civic life, during key opportunities for social connectedness, like time spent with friends or family, only 26% of Texans reported that they frequently discussed politics.

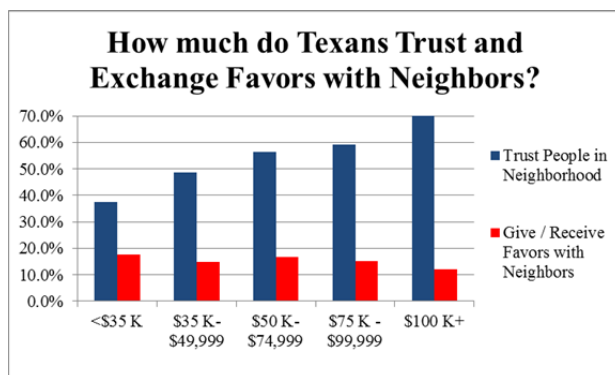
Figure 24: Trust and Exchanging Favors with Neighbors by Area



Almost 50% of Texans reported that they trust all or most of the people in their neighborhoods and 43% said that they talk with them frequently. At the same time, only 15% reported that they exchanged or receive favors from their neighbors. Members of rural

communities have significantly more trust in people in their neighborhoods than residents living in urban areas.

Figure 25: Trust and Exchanging Favors with Neighbors by Income



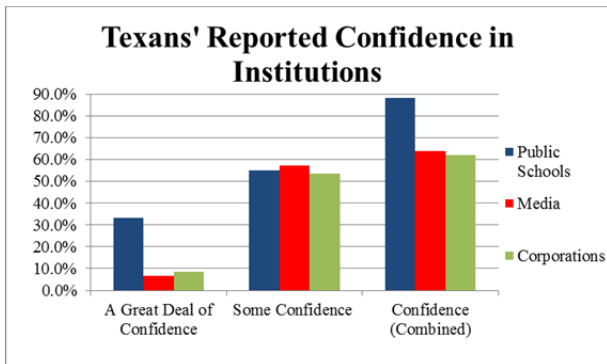
The U.S. Census Bureau data reported that Texans with the highest incomes had more trust (71.3%) in their neighbors than residents in lower household income (36.7%). Interestingly, however, 17.6% of

residents in lower income brackets reported exchanging or receiving favors frequently from their neighbors, while only 12% of Texans with an income of \$100,000 or more do the same.

Confidence in social institutions is also central to the health of civic life for many reasons. During the 2010-2011 biennium, public and higher education costs combined constituted the largest category of state spending and accounted for 41.4 percent of all appropriations and 60.7 percent of general revenue spending.¹⁰⁵ If so much of our tax dollars are going to support our public education system, one would hope that citizens feel confident in the integrity of the institution. Misuse of funds is a sure way to grow resentment. If citizens aren't confident in the public school system, one could imagine that over time, citizens might grow apathetic toward the political process or from trying to improve the situation.

¹⁰⁵ Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts. Financial Allocation Study of Texas. Public Education Spending in Texas. Retrieved from: <http://www.fastexas.org/study/exec/spending.php>

Figure 26: Texans' Reported Confidence in Institutions



Luckily, over 50 percent of Texans report some confidence in the system and we also see that it is the category with the highest percentage of respondents feeling a great deal of confidence, compared to the other

institutions such as the media and corporations.

CONCLUSION

Voter registration and turnout data during the 2010 midterm election offers a glimpse into a worse-case scenario for Texas. During times when there isn't a presidential election and political engagement isn't being encouraged by a larger national conversation, Texans turnout at the polls significantly less than the rest of the nation. The data also illustrated important overarching trends like: residents with at least some college education reported to be more civically engaged than those without college experience; respondents with higher levels of income were more civically engaged than those with the lowest household income (especially on the indicators of contacting your elected official and donating to an organization or cause); and age continued to show patterns indicating that citizens who were 30 years and older were engaged in more civic participation than their younger counterparts. And finally, residents who reported as Hispanic or Latino not only showed low levels of political participation, but also some of the lowest levels across indicators of civic involvement and social connectedness as well.

The results showing that age, race, income, and education as indicators highly correlated with civic participation are not new findings to social scientists, but are still

important for understanding civic life in Texas. At the same time, even the data covered in this report are limited. Texas is so large that even statewide data is not enough to truly understand Texas' civic health. A more robust representative sample from each of the regions or metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) is needed to really identify and understand civic behavior more deeply. Furthermore, the CPS supplements only ask questions related to behaviors that physically express citizen's beliefs about civic life, but there are too many assumptions that can be made without more data. For example, even though a citizen chose to vote in the 2010 midterm election, we know nothing else about their other civic habits or beliefs. Hispanic/Latino residents are exhibiting the lowest levels of civic engagement in Texas, but is there a reason for that? And if so, what is it? Limitations in the data put us in a difficult situation in which researchers are able to show snapshots of what's happening, but can't offer much else in the way of tracking citizens over time or exploring more deeply the causes which support and depress civic involvement.

At the same time, it would be fair to assume that what is occurring on a statewide level in Texas is a representation of what might be found in local MSAs. Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that regional data would find more people voting in presidential elections than the midterms? And that more voters are registered than turnout to vote on Election Day? One could assume that within the local regions of Texas that data would also show that ethnicity, income, age, and education were key forecasters for whether or not a citizen would be civically engaged. Regardless, it is our challenge to understand what is happening in the lives of these subgroups and to learn more about the beliefs, values, and opportunities available to engage them more in political process.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

DISCUSSION

An active civic life isn't for everyone. Genuine obstacles exist that affect people's disposition and capacity to be politically or civically engaged. For one, most citizens feel that the political arena has become hostile, irrational, and polarized. The lack of civility and reasoned debate can be a turn-off to engaging in the process. Information overload and lack of trust in the media to offer unbiased information also can cause citizens to want to exit the civic process entirely. Civic education is moving lower on the priority list for school administrators and teachers, which is putting greater emphasis on parents, community groups, and social institutions like the media to influence and shape our beliefs about citizenship. Positive role models can play an important role in shaping civic ideas; however, fewer and fewer parents are following public affairs or talking about current events with their family at the dinner table. Political leaders increasingly are shown to not exemplify the values of ethical leadership, service, and social justice and media outlets aren't telling stories about the positive or beneficial aspects of civic engagement.

Civic Engagement is Complex

At the same time, we cannot assume that citizens are choosing not to contact their representatives, for example, solely due to a lack of interest in doing so. Real barriers exist that might prevent a citizen from reaching out. Although modern technology like email and social media has offered more avenues for connecting to your elected officials, traditional letter-writing can be a daunting activity if you aren't confident in your language skills, and it can be extremely time consuming if you are hoping to make a substantive argument. Very rarely does letter writing even offer the satisfaction of feeling

like your voice was heard and that your contribution made a difference. Furthermore, in order to effectively advocate to your elected official a citizen would need the most up-to-date knowledge about current events and policy topics being decided upon. The citizen would need civic skills and political savvy to help them know how to effectively get heard in the political wilderness of our modern times. And finally, that citizen would need positive depositions and attitudes that support their sense of agency and encourages them to hold on to the belief that their actions will matter and that the activity was worth your time, regardless of the outcome.

Voting as the Proxy for Civic Health

There are a variety of reasons why social scientists have for decades used voter registration and turnout as the proxy for determining levels of civic participation; however it is important to be cautious to not paint the picture of citizenship in a dichotomous sense, i.e. as merely those who vote vs. those who do not vote. Individuals might choose to vote to ensure that their voices are heard and to illustrate the power of the people to give authority and to take it away. People might choose to vote because they pay taxes and want a say in who is deciding how to spend their hard-earned income. Citizens might choose to vote because they understand the value of good leadership and want to live in a country where the elected officials represent the moral standards and honorable decision-making they would expect from the position.

However, it is important to note that the act of *not* voting is also, to some, a form of political engagement. Citizens who feel that their vote doesn't matter, that the system is too corrupt to make a difference, or that they disprove of both candidates are still engaged, still owning their civic duty, yet choosing to abstain from the act of voting.

Therefore, voting cannot be the sole proxy researchers use to articulate the status of our civic health. We need a broader definition to serve our modern needs.

Changes in the Field of Journalism

Awareness of what's happening in your surroundings is essential to being a guardian of our country and the people who live within it. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently produced a comprehensive review, *The Information Needs of Communities*, finding that despite greater access to information via 24-hour cable news and the Internet, communities faced a shortage of reporting on state and local affairs. Significant cutbacks at news outlets mean that there is less time for investigative reporting or covering local interest stories. The FCC report also found that between 1989 and 2009, the number of reporters covering the Texas State Legislature and other state offices dropped significantly.¹⁰⁶

Since then, the *Texas Tribune* has entered the public sphere and has done an excellent job providing reliable, unbiased information and news. However, with a state this big it would be impossible to put the entire duty on their organization. What is happening on the local level can only be reported at the local level. Positive results have come from encouraging more citizen journalists to post information and serve as the news outlets' "eyes and ears on the ground." Some suggest that over time our society might see a rise in citizen bloggers and videographers, using the power of the Internet to fill in the gap of biased, unethical journalism. And as exciting as this prospect is, the only downside to these citizen journalists' endeavors is that they still need to be peer-reviewed before they can become official, reliable news. Without a peer review process, the

¹⁰⁶ The Federal Communications Commission. (July 2011). *The Information Needs of Communities: The Changing Media Landscape in a Broadband Age*. Retrieved from: <http://www.fcc.gov/info-needs-communities>

concerns about misinformation haven't been improved, but rather just shifted to a new medium. Data is currently too limiting to really know how significantly these dynamics have affected civic life in Texas and without further research, civic enthusiasts really won't know what the best avenue is for sparking conversation or boosting engagement. But, while the field of civic life figures out how to dig deeper into the unknown dynamics of civic development, motivations, and beliefs, there are still several exciting and tangible recommendations we can focus on.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Develop Comprehensive Data about Civic Life

Phone and online surveys that explore not only the behaviors of individuals, but also the beliefs, values, and needs of civic life are paramount to gaining a deeper understanding of the state of our civic health. Furthermore, regional data that also explores community assets and resources would help support civic leaders' ability to improve the process and engage more citizens. Funding for more nonpartisan research and civic education programs should be brought into Texas because of the state's low levels of engagement compared to the nation. Analysis should incorporate the voices of everyday citizens in Texas, not outsiders who can't relate to the specific political culture and experiences of being a Texan.

Focus on High-Quality Civic Education

Civic education and schools can play an important role in many ways. If citizens fall in love with learning early on in life, they will most likely become lifelong learners who are interested in fully understanding what's happening in their communities and the role that individuals play in influencing desired outcomes. This is the essence of the concept of self-governance and is an essential element to our nation's democratic

process. In many regards Texas is a breeding ground for the ideals of self-governance: residents are tenaciously independent, locally-focused, and mostly conservative in their ideology. The tenets of self-governance cannot come to fruition without active engagement in civic and public life. But, our state is not adequately resourcing the next generation with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed for active, sustained engagement and is therefore not equipping citizens with an environment conducive to producing the true achievement of our own ideals.

Increase Access to Quality Information

If citizens are being turned off by the lack of quality news and information than that is one tangible way to begin developing change. Organizations that focus on making news interactive like the *Texas Tribune* or work toward greater transparency in the political process, like the *Sunlight Foundation* should continue their efforts and seek to expand their reach to more citizens. Voter guides that offer nonpartisan, unbiased, educational information to citizens about the specific values and positions of candidates are *not* produced by the Texas State Secretary of State's office or by the counties themselves. Therefore, without groups like *Project Vote Smart* and the *League of Women Voters* who do produce truly nonpartisan voter guides, political parties are the ones shaping the information constituents receive about candidates and political news. Educators, nonpartisan organizations, and civic leaders must invest more in the infrastructure that promotes objective information.

Use the Internet to Engage

Limitations on time, money, and skills exist and might prove to be obstacles too difficult to overcome in the near future; yet, appealing to individuals online is one simple, easy, low-cost way to engage. Furthermore, research has even shown that the Internet is a

great avenue for engaging more introverted individuals who might not be natural “joiners” or have a tendency to disengage in social situations.”¹⁰⁷ At the same time, just providing information online isn’t really enough. The concepts of civic life and the avenues for engagement must align with the new platforms and methods for online interaction. Political information must be easily accessible, even to the extent that raw data sets are available online, and it must include opportunities for collaboration and interaction.¹⁰⁸ In order for civic life to compete with all of the other distractions online, it must encourage innovation and the development of new technology and it must be conducive to peer-to-peer sharing that online users have grown to expect in the 21st century.

¹⁰⁷ Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, A., Vraga, E., & Shah, D. (2010). Digital democracy: Reimagining pathways to political participation. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 7(1), 36-51.

¹⁰⁸ Sherri Greenberg and Angela Newell. (2012) Transparency Issues in E-Governance and Civic Engagement. Chapter 3. Active Citizen Participation in E-Government: A Global Perspective. Retrieved from: <http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/cpg/research-projects.php>

Conclusion

Michael Schudson put it perfectly when he wrote that “we need a citizenship fit for our own day.”¹⁰⁹ The imperative of our time is to pull citizenship out of the dark ages and into the 21st century. No longer can civic groups suggest that voting is the definitional behavior of a good citizen, because we know that exchanging favors with your neighbors or helping to fundraise for someone’s *Kickstarter* campaign is just as fundamental to civic life as the traditional forms of participation like voting and signing petitions. It is important to take pause when Internet enthusiasts suggested that coding is the new language of democracy and not brush it off as a new fad or a naïve understanding of our democratic history. For the individuals who kept the Internet live during the Arab Uprising in Egypt, coding very much is the new language that promotes, sustains, and protects our democratic ideals. The ability to create new online platforms that are socially conscience or applications that promote the common good are a microcosm of democracy, capitalism, and self-governance all in one.

The modern citizen is looking to learn from the experts, but seeks to engage, explore, and shape their identity and behaviors on their own and their peer groups. The top down package of political parties no longer appeals to a generation who knows that life is much more complicated than the ideological divide of the Republican or Democratic parties. Schudson suggests that the “goal should be to complement citizenry competence with specialized expert resources.”¹¹⁰ Which brings us back to the question of how healthy is our civic system? Do we have enough expert resources? Are we supporting citizens in developing key competencies? Do we know enough about civic life

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Schudson pg. 9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

to fully understand the dynamics that shape our beliefs, motivations, and choices? Is the information we do have comprehensive enough to make a true assessment of civic life?

President Obama rallied the American people at the end of his 2013 Inaugural Address with the statement,

Today we continue a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time. For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they've never been self-executing; that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth. ¹¹¹

The dynamics of the 21st century are complicated, yet if the next chapter of our American story will be written by the reported “most networked generation in history,” then instead of feeling discouraged, we should feel excited about what is to come. Our interconnectedness is what will fuel civic life and ensure that we all do our part.

¹¹¹ Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama. Retrieved from: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>

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