



The League
of Women Voters
of Chicago



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of Chicago**

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A Time for Action: *A New Vision of Participatory Democracy*

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A Time for Action: *A New Vision of Participatory Democracy*

DEMOCRACY'S CHALLENGE

We live in a time of momentous political decisions, yet of declining political participation. Fewer and fewer people turn out on election day, take a hand in community affairs, or join civic organizations. More and more people see politics as overwhelming, bewildering, and frustrating. At the root of this dilemma we find today's newcomers to the system, our youngest voters, adults under 25 – a group we must recognize as the bellwether for the future of American democracy. We are faced with an entire bloc of people entitled to vote yet effectively locked out by a system that ignores their needs, undermines their confidence, and even disdains their input. From politicians, from the media, and from society at large, young adults have internalized the message that they are not serious enough, that they are not responsible enough, that the business of government is not their business.

To those young people we issue this challenge: *Government is everyone's business.* Yours is an important voice in our democratic process, in our country and in our future. Don't wait for the powers that be to invite you to the table, and don't worry if they don't like your table manners.

Young people already know the most important things any citizen needs to know: the issues that matter to them and to their communities. They attend local schools and colleges, they use public transportation, they worry about finding good jobs, they have friends and peers serving in Iraq. Still, too few are turning these issues into action.

America has faced this kind of challenge before. The League of Women Voters was created on the eve of the passage of the 19th Amendment by women who realized that the right to vote by itself was not enough. That right had to be exercised, and women needed encouragement to do this. As newcomers to the political sphere, they needed information not just on voting processes but on the policy issues that impacted their lives and inspired them to get involved.

The right to vote was hard-won. The arguments against suffrage still had wide currency: that women were too delicate to vote, or not intelligent enough, or too emotional. Overcoming these perceptions was critical to giving women both the confidence and the resources to participate.

And they did participate. Today, women comprise a powerful voting bloc that has reshaped the character of political debate in America. As a group they are studied, they are polled, they are courted; their opinions matter.

Yet the challenges of yesterday, however well met, only give way to the challenges of today, and the League's mission has evolved to face them. Our society and our democracy are diminished when any group withdraws from the process, denying us their concerns, their ideas and their vision. With the political stakes as highly charged as they are at present, this absence is more keenly felt than ever. The League today invites young adults to step forward and be heard, to exercise their power as voters; indeed, to go beyond that and build a movement. With this report as a foundation, the League is launching a campaign to bring first young Chicagoans, and eventually all young Americans, back into civic life. The health of our democracy demands nothing less.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

The League of Women Voters of Chicago's Civic Engagement Project is a broad-based research study examining the factors influencing Americans' attitudes toward voting and political participation, undertaken in response to concerns over decreasing levels of that participation. The Project's mission also includes evaluating potential strategies for reversing the trend, and recommending steps for action. The Project Task Force reviewed the existing literature on problems of civic engagement, conducted focus groups of its own, and was able to identify several important findings of fact. Those findings can be broken down into two categories: diagnostic and prescriptive.

FINDINGS

Diagnostic

In assessing the problem, the Task Force recognized first and foremost that **the problem is most dire among the youngest voters**, the generation under 25. In the phase of life when people form lifelong habits of political behavior, participation levels are at historic lows. This is our "target audience."

Second, it is noteworthy that **voting is not the only marker of civic engagement**; it exists on a continuum of behavior that can and should be addressed at every point, from the totally "disengaged" to people who have some level of exposure and awareness of issues, through those who vote at least semi regularly and sometimes participate in community activities, on finally to those few who express consistently high levels of interest, awareness, and activism.

Bolstering this observation is the fact that actual voting does not necessarily coincide with levels of voter *registration*, which has been the focus of many organizations' efforts; the two behaviors have actually trended in opposite directions. In fact, there is substantial evidence indicating that **cultural and social factors not directly related to politics** have a significant influence on political behavior. People's personal environments (economic, educational, professional, familial) have an effect at many points on the degree of connection (if any) they will feel with political matters.

The fourth key finding is that people (even if interested) cannot and will not increase their levels of civic engagement unless they have access to **reliable information relevant to their interests** and are aware of **how to interpret and act on that information**. Resources for obtaining political information are far from adequate, and not all the blame can be placed on the media; the public education system in particular has failed in recent years to meet the civic information needs of the students who are now the young adult "targets."

Fifth, there are still **significant institutional barriers deterring voting and civic engagement**, although some progress has been made on that front in recent decades. Procedural hardships, campaign finance rules, the structure of political parties, and the Washington-centered character of many "grass-roots" organizations all play a role. Unfortunately, these barriers will not go away unless citizens demand it; still, this situation suggests that public officials themselves should be seen as a secondary target audience for the Project and encouraged to find ways to reconnect to a wider range of their constituents rather than focusing solely on those who remain engaged in the political process as it stands.

Sixth, many organizational efforts to encourage youth engagement have suffered from an *ad hoc* sensibility; they focus narrowly on voter registration and/or short-term electoral turnout, but they lack the elements that would **connect young people to personally meaningful actions** and inspire them to pursue higher levels of civic engagement over the long term.

Prescriptive

Seeking possible solutions, the Project Task Force begins by observing “**social marketing**” tactics other organizations have used successfully to influence public behavior. Noteworthy examples include Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and the anti smoking “TRUTH” campaign – both of which started at a local level but captured national attention through strategic marketing.

No less significant is the **Internet**: although a recent arrival on the political landscape, it has already proved to be an invaluable organizing tool, and one that elicits particularly high levels of awareness from the primary target audience (although socioeconomic differentials in online access are still a concern).

Finally, the Project Task Force discovered that a key shortcoming of other studies and organizational efforts in this area has been inadequate **self-assessment**. There is a frustrating lack of follow-up evaluation to determine the relative effectiveness of different approaches – and such results as are measured typically focus only on voting (or registration), at the expense of other forms of civic engagement. The Project Task Force considers change in this area to be crucial.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on its findings, the Project Task Force recommends attacking the problem with a multi-pronged strategy, leveraging the LWV’s long experience with political education to help people link interests to action, both individually and in concert with their fellow citizens. This strategy focuses on the whole continuum of engagement, rather than just one aspect of it (e.g., voting or registration). The goal is to demystify and, indeed, move beyond traditional “politics,” focusing instead on issues and actions that are meaningful and personally rewarding to participants.

- The strategy should start with **outreach toward young adults who demonstrate at least partial engagement** as defined by the “continuum,” encouraging these individuals to reach those at lower levels of engagement via peer-to-peer networking
- It should create a “brand” that represents ideas and values that appeal to this target audience, and promote that brand via a **media-savvy social marketing campaign**, integrating the Internet as an essential (but not exclusive) tool.
- It should identify, recruit, and train a Youth Advisory Council to **develop youth leadership**, providing an access point to connect young adults with each other and with organizations active on issues of concern.
- It should seek to **build partnerships** with other social institutions, businesses, and community organizations concerned with civic engagement among young adults.
- In addition, it is important to **address politicians themselves as a secondary audience**, incorporating them in a positive feedback loop demonstrating the mutual rewards of civic engagement.
- Finally, it will be crucial to **collect empirical baseline and outcome data** on the effectiveness of the project, and address any shortcomings that reveal themselves.

The Project Task Force recommends implementing this strategy through **a pilot program in Cook County**, an area with a wide diversity of demographic and economic conditions that is, at the same time, small enough to make assessment of the program’s effectiveness manageable. Once its effectiveness has been demonstrated, the strategy should be instituted on a larger scale regionally and nationally.



A Time for Action:
*A New Vision
of Participatory Democracy*

INTRODUCTION

“If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.”

~ Aristotle

For over eighty years, the League of Women Voters has been a voice for women and men of all backgrounds, rising above partisan disputes to help citizens fully and intelligently exercise their rights – and their responsibilities – as participants in the American experiment. The League has earned a reputation for integrity and fairness, and generations have relied upon League resources to help them make the kind of informed decisions that keep policymakers responsive and truly give weight and meaning to the hallowed phrase “consent of the governed.”

The League has cultivated expertise on electoral behavior and public policy at national, state, and local levels, and has been a leader in identifying and researching political trends. In recent years, one of the most distressing trends has been the ongoing decline of civic participation, in the voting booth and beyond. If one measure of the health of democracy is the rate at which citizens participate in elections, the fitness of the American body politic has been spiraling downward ever since voter turnout peaked in 1960.

Recognizing the need for new insights and strategies to attack this problem, the Chicago chapter of the League convened a Task Force of recognized experts and leaders from the community to spearhead an examination of the factors at play. Concerned organizations of many stripes have studied the situation over the years, but there has been no authoritative summary of what we know and what we yet need to learn that can be turned into real steps toward a solution. Why are people dropping out of the political process...and what can be done to draw them back? What creative strategies hold the most promise for capturing Americans’ attention, raising their awareness, and inspiring them to participate?

The Task Force’s findings are often disturbing, yet they also give cause for optimism. Americans may be keeping to themselves in growing numbers, but they do not do so solely from apathy or indifference; and want only to be invited to share their views, to be assured that government will pay attention, to be shown how and why they can make a difference. Young people especially have felt shut out of the process, despite knowing as well as anyone what matters to them and their communities. It’s time they were invited back in. In this deeply polarized political moment, it is vitally important that we remind all Americans that civic engagement isn’t merely about the often arcane and alienating world of politics – it’s a way to share in something bigger than ourselves, to express our devotion to our country and our community, to assure that (in Abraham Lincoln’s timeless phrase) “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Here in the state that was home to the author of those words, in the city where he was nominated for the presidency, we can take the first steps toward reinvigorating the vision he expressed. It is the hope of the League and the Task Force that this report will point the way toward those steps.



A Time for Action: A New Vision of Participatory Democracy

KEY FINDINGS

"No government is ever perfect. One of the chief virtues of a democracy, however, is that its defects are always visible and under democratic processes can be pointed out and corrected."
~Harry S Truman

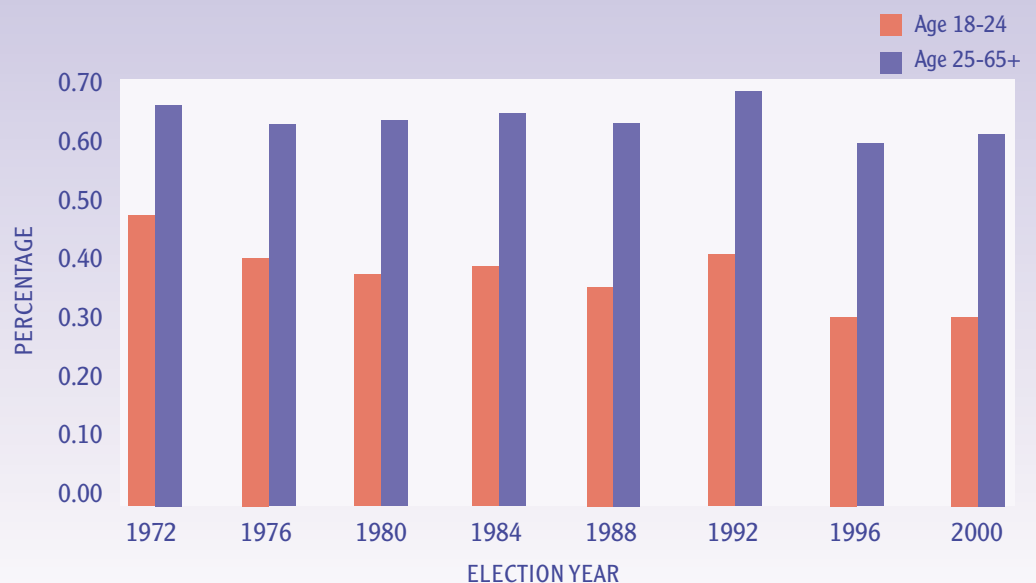
DIAGNOSTIC

I. Young adults are the demographic with the most pressing need

A review of available data makes it clear that one demographic lags further behind in voter turnout and participatory attitudes than any other. Youth of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds vote at significantly lower rates, are less likely to participate in civic activities than their elders, and tend to have more cynical attitudes towards politics and government. Voter turnout and political survey data show a marked contrast in participation levels and attitudes between young adults and their older counterparts.

Among the voting-age population, young adults are the least likely to cast a vote in any election. In the 2000 presidential election, only 32 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds voted, while nearly twice as many (62 %) of those 25 and over cast ballots. (See Figure 1) This contrast is even more evident in Congressional elections, although voter turnout overall for these elections is generally lower. In 1998, only 18.5 percent of citizens 18-to-24 voted, compared with 52 percent of those 25 and over.¹ The age gap has grown considerably since 1972 when the voting age was changed to 18.

Figure 1: Percentage of VAP Voting in Presidential Elections by Age Group 1972-2000



Data Source: Federal Election Commission and the U.S. Census Bureau (2003)

Age plays a role in attitudes towards government, political parties, and voting. According to a poll conducted by the Council for Excellence in Government, 69 percent of young adults (age 18-34) felt disconnected from government – including 30 percent who felt “very disconnected.” Only 12 percent of seniors over 64 felt “very disconnected.”²

¹ Federal Election Commission 2000

² Hart, Teeter 1999

According to a poll conducted by the Council for Excellence in Government, 69 percent of young adults (age 18-34) felt disconnected from government – including 30 percent who felt “very disconnected.”

Younger people are less likely to pay close attention to national, state, and local politics. A 1999 survey found that only 26 percent of respondents in the 18-25 age group claimed they paid “a lot of attention” to national politics, compared with 45 percent of those 26 and over. A similar contrast appeared when respondents were asked about their level of attention to state (22% and 37% respectively) and local (22% and 35% respectively) governments.³ The same survey found that only 45 percent of younger respondents said they would “definitely” vote in the 2000 election, compared with 64 percent of older respondents. Although a majority of the respondents identified themselves as “Independent-Other,” younger people (18-25) were more likely to identify themselves this way.⁴

The causes of this difference between age groups are widely debated. Many studies⁵ mention age as a factor in voting but do not make it a focus or present extensive detail about it. Hypotheses have included geographic mobility, time-consuming quests for a mate and a job, and the absence of marriage and family responsibilities as factors contributing to a lack of interest in broader issues. Among 18-to-24-year-olds, students have been found to vote more often than non-students.⁶ This may be because students are participants in a school community, have more social ties, and are more likely to be exposed to political information – factors that may also explain the effect of education level on voting behaviors.

II. Voting exists on a continuum of civic engagement

The Project Task Force determined that voting is just one of several indicators that measure the health of a nation’s democracy. Citizens who are involved in civic affairs, participate in their communities, and communicate with policymakers are more likely to be voters. Whether the opposite relationship is true is still a subject of debate. It is clear, however, that the issue of voter turnout cannot be addressed without considering its place in the larger picture of civic participation. Many of the data and studies examined by the Project Task Force reinforce this conclusion.

According to Robert D. Putnam, public policy professor at Harvard University, the quality of public life and government is powerfully influenced by multiple forms of civic engagement. In recent decades, America has experienced not just a drop in voter participation but a sharp decline in civic engagement and community involvement in all forms. Membership and volunteering in various civic and fraternal organizations has dropped by amounts ranging from 26 to as much as 61 percentage points since 1970. Traditionally popular forms of civic and community participation such as church attendance, PTA involvement, and union membership have all seen significant declines since the 1960s.⁷

According to the General Social Survey, the proportion of Americans who socialize with their neighbors more than once a year declined 11 percent between 1974 and 1993.⁸ The survey also found that Americans have grown less trusting of other people and of government in general. Studies in the United States and throughout the world have shown that there are direct correlations between participation in politics, socializing with neighbors, levels of social trust, and association membership.

The overall decline in civic engagement is most apparent among members of the post baby boom generations. In 2000, National Election Studies found that only nine percent of Generations X and Y (defined in this case as the populations from birth years 1965-’78 and

³ Project Vote Smart/ Pew Charitable Trusts 1999

⁴ Project Vote Smart/ Pew Charitable Trusts 1999

⁵ Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady 1995; Abramson, Aldrich, & Rohde 2002; Teixeira 1992; Abramson 1983; Almond & Verba 1963

⁶ Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980

⁷ Putnam, 2000

⁸ Putnam, 2000

KEY FINDINGS

post-1978, respectively) had telephoned, written, or visited a government official regarding a public issue, and only three percent had worked for a political party, protested, or demonstrated. Only half as many (27%) Generation X and Y students ran for an elected office in school as their parents (50%), and only 44 percent served as an officer for an organization, compared with 63 percent of their parents.⁹

Students who participate in student government or community service tend to be more knowledgeable about politics and more confident about that knowledge and their ability to participate.¹⁰ Television watching, a passive activity often blamed for the decrease in civic activity and socialization in the United States, has actually been shown to decrease the political knowledge of students.¹¹

To help clarify the continuum of civic engagement, the Task Force designated varying levels of engagement as shown in **Figure 2**. For further research initiatives, it would be helpful to discover where members of the target group fall within this continuum.

Figure 2: Continuum of Civic Engagement

Disengaged → Exposure → Awareness → Civic Responsibility → Interested → Fully Engaged

The levels of engagement are defined as follows:

- **Disengaged:** Little to no awareness/knowledge of relevant political or community issues, elected leaders and representatives, or governmental and electoral processes.
- **Exposure:** Some exposure to issues from media sources such as local news; political knowledge is limited. Does not participate in community or political activities.
- **Awareness:** Dialogues with friends about issues of personal concern but lacks complete information. Does not actively seek in-depth information from alternative resources. Relies on “shortcut” information provided by co-workers, friends, and family.
- **Civic Responsibility:** Votes sporadically in response to feelings of responsibility; maybe participates briefly in volunteer activities; socializes with neighbors; fairly knowledgeable about issues relevant to personal life, and has general knowledge about mainstream national issues.
- **Interested:** High level of issue awareness; fairly high level of political knowledge but may need more in-depth information. Wants to be more involved but needs a path to action and engaging others. Knowledgeable about candidate positions and votes consistently in high-profile elections.
- **Fully Engaged:** Informed and knowledgeable on a wide variety of issues; consistently seeks more information; active and prominent in community (e.g., attends public meetings); dialogues with policymakers and local leaders; actively seeks to bring others into action; votes in all elections.

⁹ Soule 2001

¹⁰ Niemi and Chapman 1998

¹¹ Niemi and Junn 1998

¹² Almond and Verba 1963, p178

¹³ Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980; Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995;

Abramson, Aldrich, & Rohde 2002; Burns, Schlozman, & Verba 2001; Teixeira 1992; Knack 1992

¹⁴ Knack 1992, p4

KEY FINDINGS

The percent of the voting age population registered to vote has actually increased in the last thirty years, thanks to widespread registration drives. However, registration alone bears no relation to an individual's propensity to vote.

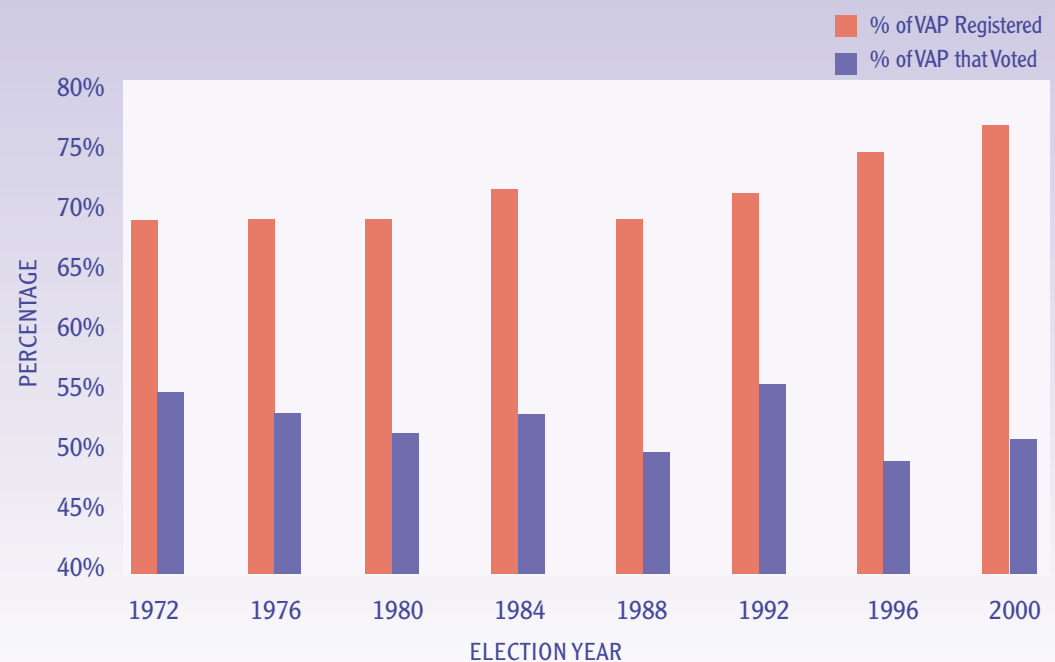
III. Voting is a behavior influenced by cultural and social factors

The percent of the voting age population registered to vote has actually increased in the last thirty years, thanks to widespread registration drives. However, registration alone bears no relation to an individual's propensity to vote, as is shown in **Figure 3**. The gap between registered voters and those who actually vote has been increasing along with the increase in registration rates. Registering voters is a necessary but not sufficient step toward a solution to voter turnout.

When examining voting behavior, it is important not to focus exclusively on political factors. In light of the disjunction with registration and the broad continuum discussed above, one cannot assume that potential voters are motivated or deterred only, or even primarily, by their reactions to specific candidates or policy issues. The Project Task Force has examined various studies offering strong evidence that a broader range of motivational factors influences voter participation.

One landmark study found that if people are to participate in the political system, they need to be situated in a "democratic culture." This culture should consist of "a set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, perceptions, and the like that support participation."¹² While the American political tradition pays rhetorical service to such an ideal, large segments of contemporary culture actually fall far short of it.

Figure 3: Percentage of VAP that Registered and Voted in Presidential Elections 1972-2000



Data Source: Federal Election Commission 2003

This study, along with several others,¹³ examined the relationship between particular voter characteristics and Election Day turnout. Significant factors were found to include not only socioeconomic status and access to political information but broader social attitudes. Voter participation incentives are based on civic and social norms and, in the words of one study, are "a function of one's own sense of duty, the strength of duty of one's family, friends, and other associates, and the frequency and quality of interaction with these potential enforcers."¹⁴

Two studies conducted by the League of Women Voters¹⁵ found voters are more likely than non-voters to recognize the importance of an election and to be immersed in a “culture” that values voting and exposes them to issues and candidates. Non-voters tend to fall outside this culture and are less likely to have been contacted by candidates or encouraged to vote by family and friends.

IV. In order to be fully engaged, people need to have interest and access to information, as well as the ability to interpret that information and apply it appropriately to the political process

Whatever the level of public *interest*, a democracy cannot function properly if its citizens are not informed and do not have at least a moderate level of political knowledge. Several studies¹⁶ link political knowledge to political engagement and voting and suggest that knowledge is required for successful political engagement and pursuit and defense of one’s interests. This connection was evident in a LWV study conducted in 1996 that showed non-voters were more likely than voters to feel that they lack accurate information.

What citizens *should* understand are the rules of the game (how the government is empowered), the substance of policymaking (what the government does), and the people and parties involved (who the government is). When acquiring political knowledge, people tend to take shortcuts and depend on secondary sources such as mass media, relatives, and co-workers to decipher information and formulate opinions.¹⁷

American citizens historically have a low level of political knowledge. Their factual knowledge of government has changed very little over the last sixty years, despite rising levels of education since the 1940s. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) suggest that the expansion of the educational system has caused a decline in the quality of education and diluted its traditional principles, one of which is to teach the requisites of citizenship.¹⁸

The dominance of corporate influence in the media has also affected the amount and quality of political information available to the public. At the end of World War II, 80 percent of newspapers were independently owned, but by 1989, 80 percent were owned by about 20 large corporations.¹⁹ The trend continues: by 2000, 90 percent of the mass media were controlled by no more than six corporations.²⁰ Television has replaced newspapers – while television viewing overall has dropped over the past decade, it is still the source most commonly relied upon by the American public (with the highest number, 57%, watching local TV news), outpacing radio (41%), newspapers (41%), and the Internet (25%). News presentations have become increasingly brief in an effort to retain viewers’ interest and save their time.

In a recent survey, 56% of respondents in all age groups indicated that media coverage of issues that matter to them is “fair” or “poor.”²¹ This sentiment was echoed by several participants in focus groups the Task Force conducted (see the Methodology section for details), who felt that the mainstream media obscure issues in which they might be interested. A 1996 LWV study emphasized the important role that information plays in voting, finding that non-voters are more likely to believe they lack credible information on which to base their voting decisions.²²

¹⁵ Lake, Snell, Perry, and the Tarrance Group 1996; Mellmen Group 1996

¹⁶ Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Niemi and Junn 1998, Galston 2001

¹⁷ Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Popkin 1991

¹⁸ Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996

¹⁹ Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996

²⁰ Bagdikian 2000

²¹ Project Vote Smart/Pew Charitable Trusts, 1999

²² LWV 1996

Non-voters are more likely to believe they lack credible information on which to base their voting decisions.

IV. (a) Young adults feel uninformed on issues and candidates

Although political knowledge naturally increases with age and experience, today's youth are starting at much lower levels than generations past. The knowledge gap between the youngest age cohorts and older ones has increased by 17 percent since the 1940s.²³

Recent data show very limited knowledge of civics among high school seniors tested on the topic. On the NAEP Civic Assessment conducted in 1998, 74 percent of the nation's twelfth-grade students performed at basic or below-basic levels. Students performing at the basic level have only partially mastered materials that are "fundamental for proficient work" at their grade level. (See Appendix A for a complete definition of proficiency levels.) The NAEP also found that only nine percent of high school seniors could list two ways that a democratic society benefits from the active participation of its citizens.²⁴

It's important to note that while young people may suffer a knowledge deficit at the entry point to adulthood, as time passes one cannot necessarily assume the age group as a whole remains less informed than other demographics. Nonetheless, early self-perceptions can leave a lasting impression, one that often acts as a deterrent. A recent study found that among young adults 18-29 years old, the most common reasons for not registering or voting are that they "don't know enough about candidates" or "don't know enough about politics/issues."²⁵

These findings were supported by dialogue between participants in the focus groups conducted for this project. Participants cited a lack of reliable and accessible information, combined with the supercharged pace of contemporary life, as deterrents to their political participation. Many of the participants expressed uncertainty on the issues affecting their lives; they felt that they were uninformed but did not have the time to seek out the information they needed.

IV. (b) Young people are not disinterested so much as disenchanted — they identify a need to be inspired and invited into the process

Much of the literature on marketing points out preference of young adults for a realistic view of the future rather than the idealized version of generations past. For this reason, many traditional marketing techniques are not necessarily effective with the younger population. They prefer a much more straightforward, honest approach.²⁶ This may apply to politics as well. However, politics is by its very nature often perceived as precluding straightforwardness and honesty. Influential and persistent interest groups and financial incentives are seen to control today's political environment, with politicians less likely to stick with a set of values than to cater to the interest groups making the most noise or contributing the most money. To younger Americans, many politicians may appear willing to do and say anything just to get elected and therefore are not worth the effort of voting.²⁷

Contrary to widespread popular conceptions participants in focus groups conducted for this study did not express *apathy*, rather, they felt cynical, overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues this country is facing, and skeptical as to whether their participation would have an impact. Many of them discussed the 2000 Presidential election and the Iraq War protests as examples of both their participation/interest and their cynicism, many of them had participated but they did not see that their participation had accomplished anything. They expressed a

²³ Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996

²⁴ National Assessment of Educational Progress 1998

²⁵ Princeton Survey Research Associates 2003

²⁶ Stanley, T.L. (1995); Hornblower (1997)

²⁷ Fineman, et al. (2000); Lueck (2000); CIRCLE Survey (2002); NASS (2000)

Matching inspiration to activity is less about awareness and messaging than about having access to clear steps for action.

desire to be engaged, but felt they needed more information on how to do so. According to a recent article on the “Tell Us the Truth” campaign, a multi city concert tour by celebrities against media consolidation and free trade, many of the young people attending the events did not respond to the fiery partisan rhetoric in evidence – not because they disagreed, but because they were looking for substantive information on how to take action and get involved at the grassroots level.²⁸

Approaches that emphasize anger at the system, often thought to spark youth into action, are actually perceived by youth as “negative” and increase their “why bother” attitude toward politics and voting.²⁹ A positive, uplifting approach seems likely to be the most effective way to motivate these young adults. *What they want is to be inspired.*

The focus groups participants underscored the importance of one of the Project’s key hypotheses: matching inspiration to activity is less about awareness and messaging than about having access to clear steps for action. They are hungering for an entry point to the decision-making process, a mechanism that will make it possible for them to participate on a more frequent basis (beyond the presidential election) and be “up to speed” on issues of concern. The participants were also responsive to the idea of power in numbers – i.e., the idea that many people with a common mindset or goal can work together to effect change.

V. Institutional barriers to voting do exist (e.g., campaign finance inequities, procedural roadblocks, and inadequate civic education) and contribute to low turnout and decreased civic engagement

Cultural and demographic factors aside, the Task Force acknowledges that institutional barriers exist and do play a significant role in voter turnout and civic participation. Several studies³⁰ suggest that the character of American political institutions dissuades citizens from getting involved in politics.

Currently, the two major political parties (and related organizations) operate with a top-down structure, and there is little connection among national, state, and county levels. Prior to the 1960s, national political parties were rooted in county and state organizations and focused on mobilizing voters; now they are based in Washington, D.C., focus on large-scale fundraising, and rely on advertising to communicate with citizens. A similar change has occurred within many interest groups, labor unions, and civic organizations. They have found that operating in Washington, nurturing ties to Congress, and utilizing legislative and regulatory tracks are more effective methods for achieving their policy goals than local grassroots participation and mobilization efforts.

Thus, much of the decline in political participation can be attributed to the decay of these institutions and to decreased incentives for political leaders to mobilize voters.³¹ Elected officials themselves bear significant responsibility; the relative safety of incumbency too often deters them from seeking out, or acknowledging, a wider range of constituent views. Citizens might be more engaged if the political roles of parties, unions, churches, and civic associations were redefined to facilitate “participation, deliberation, and accountability” and promote a common purpose in public life.³² People will be more likely to participate if they believe their actions will achieve results important to their everyday lives.

²⁸ Cave, Damien. Salon.com, 2003

²⁹ LWV Focus Groups 2003

³⁰ Weir and Ganz 1997; Piven and Cloward 1988

³¹ Weir and Ganz, 1997

³² Weir and Ganz 1997, p150-51

People will be more likely to participate if they believe their actions will achieve results important to their everyday lives.

V. (a) Campaign Finance

Participation levels are influenced by public cynicism born of the large amounts of money spent on political campaigns. This suspicion is not new, but the growth of so-called “soft money” donations has seemed to further focus public attention on the problem. Soft money donations – political contributions not limited by the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, donated to parties rather than to candidates, to be used for activities such as issue advertising and party-building—have usually come from groups such as large corporations, trade associations, and unions, and they have increased over 475 percent from 1992 to 2000. Thus the campaign finance reforms of the 1970s became a transforming factor in the structure of political organizations, but not in the way originally intended.³³ The reforms enabled national parties to funnel soft money contributions toward the support of federal candidates who were not eligible to receive the funds directly. They also enabled political parties to operate without the support of local grassroots operations, deterring the participation of ordinary citizens. Many people have argued that soft money has a distorting effect on both the public agenda and the legislative process; a New York Times poll found that 75 percent of those polled believed that their public officials make or change policy based on the money received from major contributors.³⁴ More recent reforms (i.e., the McCain-Feingold campaign finance law, recently held to be constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court) have attempted to mitigate these unintended consequences and restrict the use of soft money. Other legal funding avenues remain open, however, and the long-term effects remain to be determined.

V. (b) Procedural Hardships

While many barriers have been removed, non-voters still perceive procedural ones. Previous discriminatory barriers to registration and voting, such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and residency requirements, were virtually eliminated after the civil rights movement of the 1960s, although several states were conducting literacy tests as late as 1970.³⁵ In 1993, the registration process became significantly easier with passage of the “motor voter” law that allows people to register when they obtain or renew a driver’s license. People can also register by mail, on the Internet, and in some cases at their local library. However, some administrative barriers still exist, such as voting on a workday and inconvenient or poorly publicized poll locations. A 1996 LWV study found that non-voters are more likely than voters to describe voting as difficult. The perception of convenience is significantly related to whether an individual votes.³⁶

Recent election reforms in Oregon include a vote-by-mail initiative that allows voters to cast their ballots by mail instead of going to the polls. Historically, voter turnout for presidential elections in Oregon has been higher than the national average, so the long-term effect of this reform remains to be determined.

V. (c) Civic Education

The overall decline in civic participation is most apparent in young people, at least in part due to an ongoing decline in quality of civic education in both high school and college curricula. The level of civics requirements has significantly decreased in recent years. Only 31 states test high school students on civics topics, and only three states have a separate test for civics; 29 states require a high school civics course, and five states require a senior year “capstone” course in civics. Only eight states offer specific certification in civics for teachers.³⁷

³³ Weir and Ganz, 1997

³⁴ Harshbarger 2000

³⁵ Piven and Cloward 1988

³⁶ LWV 1996

³⁷ NACE 2003

KEY FINDINGS

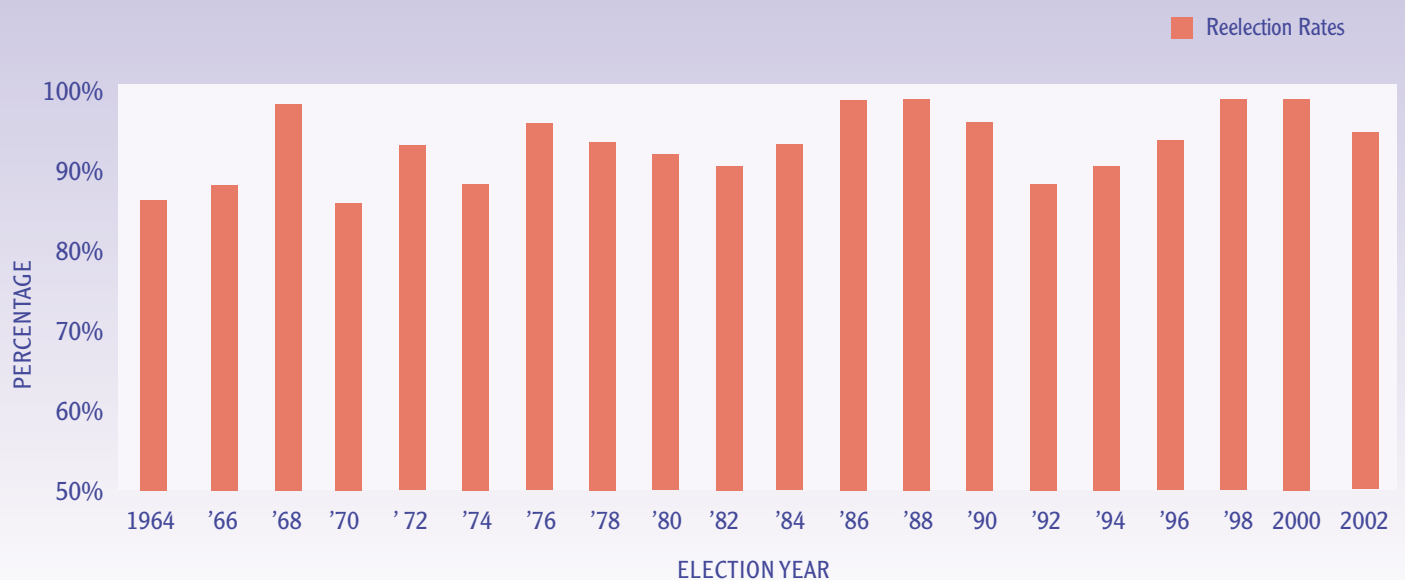
The decline in high school civics education is evident in curriculum patterns. From 1916 through about 1960, social studies focused on citizenship, with courses in civics, government, and problems of democracy. In the 1960s and 1970s the “New Social Science” changed the focus to political behavior and processes, the process of social science inquiry, and skills for democratic participation in society. By the 1980s law-related education had become a main priority, and civics became intertwined with history and geography curricula.³⁸

Two studies³⁹ stress the importance of a civics curriculum in increasing young people’s knowledge of civics and government. Both curricular content and the amount of coursework play a significant role; curricular factors have been found to be significantly and positively related to political knowledge and civic development in high school students, even after accounting for such factors as college plans, family, race, and gender.⁴⁰ Schools are a critical link between education and citizenship; they can and should help people enter adult citizenship feeling knowledgeable and confident, rather than uninformed and intimidated.

V. (d) Institutional barriers will not be removed without citizen demand

The status quo favors incumbents, as is shown by their high reelection rates and increased access to campaign money. Despite citizen concern and candidates’ promises, reforms have been long in coming and more modest than many critics had hoped. Reelection rates for members of the U.S. House of Representatives have been well above 80 percent in some decades and frequently above 90 percent as shown in **Figure 4**. Reelection rates for Senate races are somewhat less predictable; however, in the last 20 years, reelection rates for Senate incumbents have dipped below 80 percent in only two elections.⁴¹

Figure 4: U.S. House of Representatives Reelection Rates 1964–2002



Data Source: Open Secrets www.opensecrets.org (2003)

³⁸ Patrick and Hoge 1991

³⁹ Niemi and Junn 1998; Patrick and Hoge 1991

⁴⁰ Niemi and Junn 1998

⁴¹ Open Secrets www.opensecrets.org 2003

KEY FINDINGS

Citizen demand is required if institutional barriers are to be removed. The incentives in the current political system support the status quo.

The Task Force acknowledges that citizen demand is required if institutional barriers are to be removed. The incentives in the current political system support the status quo. Until citizens demand changes in the system, policymakers will have little incentive to initiate it. Nonetheless, it would be myopic to focus on only one half of the equation; policymakers can and should be encouraged to see positive change in the system as a win-win not a win-lose dynamic and to pursue citizen input actively, rather than complacently accepting its absence. Efforts to help a coherent young adult voting bloc find its issues and its voice are also efforts to help officeholders reach a new audience and expand their base.

VI. Many organizational efforts to encourage youth civic participation fail to engage their audience on all relevant levels.

Civic participation is not something that can be generated simply or easily. In the current heated political climate and with an upcoming election, there are already widespread efforts to bring youth into the electoral process. Many of these campaigns involve various combinations of several familiar techniques: voter registration drives, phone canvassing, celebrity performances and statements, web sites, petitions, and anti-incumbent rhetoric and propaganda. However, one element seems to be missing from all these campaigns: a message that inspires youth and (most importantly) provides a connection to relevant ongoing action.

PRESCRIPTIVE

VII. “Social marketing” has demonstrated tremendous success at both creating behavioral change and pressuring political and cultural change

The Project Task Force examined several successful social marketing campaigns and determined that they are an effective way to create cultural change and put pressure on political structures. Social marketing entails the employment of marketing tactics to raise awareness, change attitudes, beliefs, and ultimately, change social behaviors. A carefully crafted brand identity, in particular, can be a crucial tool, evoking a strong and lasting emotional reaction in audiences. Research is critical to developing a social marketing campaign and should be used to identify the targeted social problem, the underlying psychological and behavior factors causing the problem, the target audience, strategies for reaching that audience, and techniques for creating public pressure to help solve the problem.

Figure 5: Individual’s Adoption of New Cultural Behaviors

Awareness → Interest → Evaluation → Trial → Adoption

In evaluating social marketing campaigns, the Task Force found the following analysis compelling, and will use it for evaluative purposes. In his 1971 book *Socio-Cultural Dynamics: An Introduction to Social Change*, Francis Allen suggests that there are five phases in the process whereby individuals adopt new cultural behaviors (see **Figure 5**):

- Awareness: population is exposed to an idea or message but lacks complete information
- Interest: process of seeking more information
- Evaluation: deciding to apply the idea
- Trial: an individual uses the idea on a small scale
- Adoption: continued use

Many campaigns make the mistake of promoting awareness as the main priority when it is really only the first step.

A good social marketing plan is one that addresses all these phases. Many campaigns make the mistake of promoting awareness as the main priority when it is really only the first step. An attempt to change cultural behavior should provide information and tools people can apply in their own lives. A successful social marketing campaign combines many different methods, and includes non traditional and innovative tools.

Including input from the target population in the development and evaluation of the campaign increases its impact. Florida's TRUTH anti smoking campaign (since expanded nationally), for example, included direct involvement of youth in grassroots advocacy and a youth-driven advertising campaign. The campaign was extremely effective in three ways: increased awareness, changes in behavior and attitudes, and a decrease in teen smoking. Within the first five months of its marketing campaign, the TRUTH program achieved 92 percent brand awareness. Although the program's main goal was prevention of teen smoking, there were additional gains. Within the first year of the program, the percentage of "current smokers" declined by 19.4 percent among middle-schoolers and eight percent among high school students.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is another successful social marketing campaign that has had a tremendous effect on social behavior and cultural values, as well as on public policy. MADD combines public awareness with youth programs and legislative efforts. After its first three years of operation, 84 percent of the public knew of MADD and 55 percent believed the organization was achieving its mission. The message at the core of the campaign is that drunk driving is a violent crime, causing death and injury, and underage drinking is a youth drug problem.

MADD focuses on youth through school programs, leadership seminars and conferences, and student activist training. To foster more outreach to the youth population, a youth board member was elected to MADD's national board. Along with creating awareness, MADD has been instrumental in passing more than 2,300 anti drunk-driving and underage drinking laws.

VIII. The Internet has demonstrated great potential for organizing and mobilizing citizens in various movements

The evidence shows that direct contact is still the best method for engaging people. One study found that phone canvassing increased voter turnout by an average of 5% and face-to-face canvassing increased it by an average of 8.5%.⁴² Unfortunately, direct personal approaches are time-consuming, labor intensive, and difficult to implement on a large scale. However, similar results can be achieved through other means, with the same ultimate goal of bringing people together on behalf of shared goals.

The combination of rapid technological advances and a paucity of broadly based grassroots social movements have changed the nature of activism. Today's technology allows more personal and time-efficient forms of activism; today's young activist might sign an Internet petition or send an e-mail to a senator but will avoid the more time-intensive activities of years past. The Internet is clearly a powerful tool for the distribution of information, especially among youth. A recent survey showed that 70 percent of respondents between the ages of 18 and 25 found the Internet to be a useful source of news, compared with only 48 percent of those 26 and over.⁴³

⁴² Green and Gerber 2001

⁴³ Project Vote Smart/Pew Charitable Trust 1999

The combination of rapid technological advances and a paucity of broadly based grassroots social movements have changed the nature of activism.

However, it is important to note that the Internet should not be the only medium used to educate, organize, and mobilize young citizens. It has two main drawbacks: the so-called digital divide and a disconnect from other people. The very personal, individualistic form of activism the Internet provides often supersedes any group cohesiveness or social interaction on the issue. Failure to see activism as part of a bigger picture may affect attitudes toward electoral participation and other movements that require a more unified citizen effort. Some Internet campaigns address this by stressing a grassroots approach and encouraging direct contact between its users via “Meet Ups,” chat rooms, or personal profiles.

More importantly, a “digital divide” still exists which limits Internet access among disadvantaged groups, usually defined along economic and racial lines. Although the divide has decreased in recent years thanks to increased access in public schools, there is still a wide gap in home access. In 2002, 77 percent of whites used a computer at home, compared with 41 percent of blacks and Hispanics, and only 31 percent of students from families earning less than \$20,000 had home access, compared with 89 percent of those from families earning more than \$75,000.⁴⁴ Even when considering student computer use outside the home, schools with greater poverty concentrations were found to have higher ratios of students to net-connected computers, and barely more than half of schools with Internet access made computers available outside of regular school hours.⁴⁵

Still, a careful balance of technology and personal interaction can bring powerful results to any campaign. The Internet has proved to be an effective tool for grassroots efforts (such as those by non-governmental organizations, non-profits, and political campaigns) to reach large numbers of people and raise awareness, provide information, and encourage participation and contributions. Incorporation of the Internet into communication outreach plans will benefit any organization that relies on the strategic use of information to gain power, create awareness, and affect behavior.

Use of the Internet allows organizations to increase the speed and reduce the costs of circulating information, making it possible to disseminate more and, most importantly, more engaging and up-to-date information. Sophisticated web pages with video and pictures can help reinforce a message; newsgroups and real-time chats allow the exchange of testimonial evidence and “real life” accounts. The Internet also makes it possible to reach an audience far beyond those who may be physically involved or exposed to the activities of the organization. This is a particular advantage for organizations working on a national or international level.

Several organizations have been successful in gaining support and influencing action using Internet media and organizing techniques. The Project Task Force examined two such organizations: the Free Burma Coalition (FBC) and MoveOn.org. The FBC is one of the world’s largest human rights campaigns and is known as a pioneer Internet-based movement. MoveOn.org is a grassroots Internet movement with the goal of getting ordinary people reengaged in progressive politics. Both web sites are engaging, interactive, and informative, and include success stories to demonstrate progress and inspire people to take action.

⁴⁴ US Department of Education 2003 <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2003/10/10292003a.html>

⁴⁵ US Department of Education 2003 <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2003/10/10292003a.html>

Both campaigns' sites⁴⁶ have been successful organizing tools because they provide background and links to other sources of information thus building credibility with users. Resources range from academic articles to press releases and even personal accounts. The FBC website provides clear steps to action on all different levels, including donating money, lobbying, organizing demonstrations, accessing media, and even raising funds for a trip to Burma to get first-hand experience on the issue. The MoveOn.org site has a similar setup; it clearly lists four options for user participation, encouraging visitors to contribute and to sign up for action updates or newsletters. Perhaps the most effective aspect of the MoveOn.org website is that it is completely interactive and provides visible feedback: users can log in to "Action Forums" and provide input on issue priorities and strategies. Other users respond, and the issues with the highest support will reach the top of the agenda. The results are impressive: the early 2003 anti war campaign on MoveOn.org collected 175,000 signatures and raised \$300,000 in donations for anti war media and marketing materials.

The Internet is also being used in new and creative ways to bring people together in the non-virtual world, helping mobilize grass-roots affinity groups of all kinds – from hobbyists and fan clubs to every point on the political spectrum. Where as in past years online contact with remote individuals was an endpoint, now it is only the starting point for other forms of activity. Two notable examples are MeetUp.com, which allows people with shared interests (from foreign languages to Wicca to computer programming, from Howard Dean supporters to libertarians to Young Republicans) to find one another and organize gatherings and activities in their immediate communities, and Friendster.com, which takes a person's current circle of friends as a starting point for an ever-expanding (and completely voluntary) network of contacts, both local and global.

IX. Better empirical data is needed to properly determine best practices

Many organizations have programs and participate in voter turnout efforts on some level, but most do not have the staff or the resources to collect data or conduct program evaluations. Thus, it is hard to tell whether these initiatives are actually effective in motivating people to vote. Over 20 organizations were contacted in the course of this study regarding various get-out-the-vote efforts, but few could offer any empirical data on the results of their efforts: of those responding, only eight had some form of program evaluation; only four used voter turnout data, and only one used exit polling. (See **Appendix B** for a complete list of organizations contacted.)

It therefore seems clear that careful follow-up evaluation should be a significant factor in whatever strategies the Task Force initiates, not only to help guide our own future steps but to contribute to the collective pool of knowledge on which other similar efforts may draw. We need to devise mechanisms to measure results in several categories – voter registration and participation levels, membership and participation in other civic organizations and activities, electoral and policy outcomes, media awareness, and target group self-identification at different points on the civic engagement continuum.

⁴⁶ www.freeburmacoalition.org; www.moveon.org



A Time for Action: A New Vision of Participatory Democracy

RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

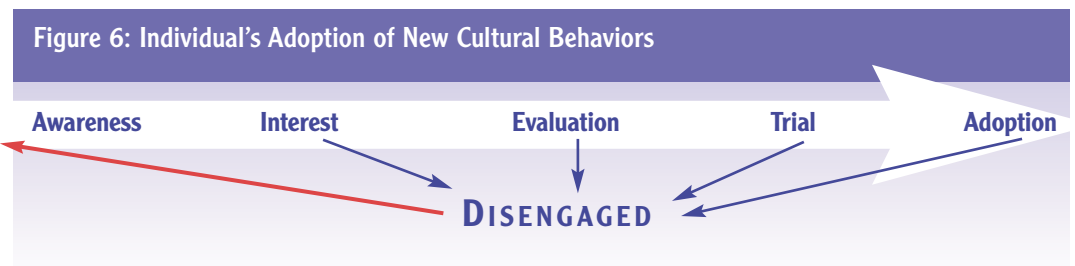
“Democracy is not something you believe in or a place to hang your hat... it’s something you do. You participate. If you stop doing it, democracy crumbles.”
~ Abbie Hoffman

Based on its findings, the Project Task Force has developed an appropriate set of strategies to address young adult civic engagement at all levels, providing youth leadership opportunities, peer-to-peer contact, connections to resources, and opportunities for personal involvement. The overall goal of this strategy is to arouse young adults’ desire to become involved in something bigger than themselves, to play a role in shaping their communities and their country—and build on that to create an ongoing movement that will connect young people to credible information, other citizens, and grassroots action. This approach should demonstrably move individual youth up the continuum of engagement, and organize them in ways that compel the attention of policymakers. The short-term objective is to create and disseminate a memorably branded message, increase young adult awareness of the issues involved and provide opportunities for grass-roots activity, and build a coalition that can coordinate future initiatives. The long-term objective is to increase levels of civic participation throughout the continuum and across the age spectrum, including but not limited to increased voter turnout, making American democracy more participatory and government more responsive.

Accordingly, the Project Task Force proposes a pilot program on a local level, in Cook County, built around the following recommendations. In addition, this program should be tested, evaluated, refined, and then introduced as appropriate on a broader geographic basis.

Recommendation 1: *Target young adults who are already politically engaged at some level.*

The primary target group can be defined as young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. However, an effective outreach strategy must recognize that within this group, individuals and sub groups are politically engaged at many different levels. Although voting is a desirable outcome, it is only one component of a continuum; the strategy should encompass a broader agenda of engaging youth in civic life. Since the population that is hardest to reach includes “fully disengaged” youth who have not been exposed to and have little awareness of issues that affect their lives, the most effective strategy would be to target the population that is already at least somewhat engaged, develop leaders within that group to organize other youth, and ultimately reach the fully disengaged. (see **Figure 6**)



Target Group Characteristics

The Project Task Force concluded that there are four main sets of characteristics that help define young adults as a distinct target audience and provide points of access through which they can be reached.

First are their *sources of information* – if neither the education system nor the media can be relied upon to provide useful civic information, young adults are left to their own devices to build up a coherent view of their society and their role in it. A credible information resource will be of real and recognizable benefit.

Second, *forms of connection* – with so many traditional social and civic institutions waning, today’s young adults have turned to new channels of interaction (primarily via the Internet), taking a more ad hoc, peer-to-peer approach to cultivating their social and political world. These “virtual” channels can be turned to political action as easily as to other purposes.

Third, *time and complexity* – a set of barriers that exacerbates the first two characteristics. Contemporary life often proceeds at a pace unknown in previous generations, and the modern infosphere is often overwhelming, not only to the uninitiated but even to those long immersed in it. Any approach to this target audience has to be framed in terms of simplifying their lives and decisions, not complicating them.

Fourth, *self-interest* – while civic altruism is not necessarily obsolete, a more self-consciously individualistic worldview has widespread currency. This should be seen as a lever for motivation, rather than an obstacle; any approach to this audience should emphasize that they are being asked not so much to sacrifice, as to play a role in something larger than themselves, thereby enriching their own lives and their communities in concrete ways.

Recommendation 2: Develop a Social Marketing Campaign that will use a carefully crafted and easily identifiable “brand” image to represent the sensibilities behind civic engagement, thus connecting young adults to issues and action.

A bold, highly visible social marketing campaign will increase civic engagement and voting by making it attractive and meaningful to young adults. The target audience can and should be included in the creation of the “brand image” for this campaign, to ensure that it effectively embodies ideas and emotions that connect with that audience and to establish an early sense of inclusiveness and credibility. There are several approaches that could achieve this; possibilities include holding a design contest, or recruiting students from local design schools to design the launch (with judging or guidance from a professional creative team). The brand must convey an upbeat and inspirational message, and should be used as widely as possible as a visual component of the marketing campaign.

The marketing campaign must promote civic engagement in a broad sense, connecting youth to fellow citizens, reliable sources of information, and tools for collective action. The campaign will be competing in a ruthlessly competitive marketplace of ideas; it must employ diverse venues – including the Internet, multiple media sources, and customized programs, events, and partnerships – to reach the broadest feasible cross-section of the target audience. It will simultaneously acquaint people with the ins and outs of the political process, and invite them to play a role in that process.

The marketing campaign must promote civic engagement in a broad sense, connecting youth to fellow citizens, reliable sources of information, and tools for collective action.

Recommendation 3: Construct a Youth Advisory Council to develop youth leaders and organize young adults around the issues and action agendas most important to them.

Youth leadership and ownership is crucial to the success and momentum of the movement. Leaders who are peers of the target group have greater credibility and are more likely to succeed in reaching a broad spectrum within that group, as demonstrated by the success of grassroots movements (such as TRUTH) in incorporating youth leadership into their campaigns. It is important to remember that the goal is not to dictate to young adults or to assimilate them into current institutions, but to help them find their own issues and voices.

Therefore, the Task Force recommends an early effort to identify, recruit, and train interested youth leaders to form a Youth Advisory Council (YAC) of 12 to 25 members. The YAC will be provided with background information, resources, training, and tools, not only to increase the members' own knowledge but to bring other youth into the movement, encouraging them by example to overcome their reservations and get involved. Essentially, it should be the center point of a network of peer-to-peer relationships, as well as the liaison to a diverse range of other organizations through programs, internships, and activism. Although a basic structure and initial guidance for the YAC will need to be in place from the outset, specific issues, programs, and initiatives of the project will naturally evolve, based on the decisions and interests of the youth leaders involved.

The YAC will serve several purposes:

- Provide target group approval for the final conception of the civic engagement “brand.”
- Develop youth leadership through training, workshops, and issue education.
- Provide an extensive network that cultivates peer-to-peer relationships and connects all youth to various types of local organizations for “hands on” involvement and action.
- Provide access points to the target group at all levels on the continuum of engagement, through youth-directed organizing, programming, and special events.
- Generate additional ideas and strategies that will enhance the overall civic engagement campaign.
- Organize the target group to apply citizen pressure on politicians and government bureaucracy to reduce institutional barriers and address issues that matter to younger citizens.

Recommendation 4: Build a coalition to provide support and resources for implementing the campaign and coordinating the larger movement.

A coalition will leverage the current movement of organizations seeking to mobilize youth and create change, providing opportunities to work together and share innovations. A coalition is a necessary adjunct to the social marketing campaign and critical to the process of identifying youth leaders.

Specifically, the functions of the coalition will include:

- Building partnerships with colleges and universities, tech schools, libraries, community centers, youth programs, civic and community groups, and other sympathetic organizations.
- Providing direct access to youth, including potential leaders.
- Disseminating the message and brand to the broadest possible cross-section of the target audience.
- Enhancing credibility for the target audience.
- Providing opportunities for action through issue-specific organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Particular strategic partnerships with local corporations, universities, and organizations might also aid in recruitment of the YAC by providing opportunities such as career advancement, college credits, or high-school public service credits. In a broader sense, these partnerships would serve as natural points of expansion for ongoing grassroots organization. Local and community organizations need to be linked to larger state and national networks to enable them to develop and achieve policy goals in a broader context.

Recommendation 5: Understand politicians to be a secondary target audience. Design the campaign to attract their attention and encourage increased dialogue with young constituents.

Political engagement is not a one-way street. Elected officials and other public servants have contributed to the problem of disengagement among the target group (as discussed in the Findings), and should be held accountable for helping to redress it, as an intrinsic part of their obligation to the public. This campaign will be designed and conducted to attract the attention of mainstream media and traditional channels of political discourse, not merely the narrower venues that directly address the primary target group. The goal is a positive feedback loop in which increased attention from policymakers motivates greater involvement from young adults, and that greater involvement from young adults further motivates attention from policymakers.

Recommendation 6: Collect baseline and outcome data to evaluate the campaign on an ongoing basis and improve administration and development of future programs and projects.

Even during the course of this study and the preparation of this report, new youth-politics organizations have arisen in response to a changing political climate, and the potential impact of the young-adult voter has begun to infiltrate the public discourse in a variety of ways. Citizen engagement in politics is a dynamic phenomenon, not a static one. The results of this campaign, and the movement it seeks to foster, should be measurable in terms of voter registration and participation levels, membership and participation in other civic organizations and activities, electoral and policy outcomes, media awareness, and target group self-identification at different points on the civic engagement continuum.

The Project Task Force recommends conducting tracking studies, at the outset and again after this year's election cycle, to evaluate changes in awareness, attitudes, and behaviors among both young adults and policymakers.



A Time for Action:
*A New Vision
of Participatory Democracy*

CONCLUSION

*“It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor.
A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.”*
~Thomas Jefferson

The Project Task Force, having gathered and evaluated evidence on the problems and trends in American civic engagement, having evaluated that evidence and extracted key findings of fact, and having recommended strategies based upon those findings, is proud to present this report and excited about the opportunity before us to forge a solution.

In the weeks and months ahead, as this pivotal election year gains momentum and public attention increasingly turns toward the political sphere, many of the problems described herein will grow in urgency. Most Americans care deeply about their communities and their country – but many of them, especially (but not exclusively!) young adults, feel cut off from the processes that affect them, and unsure how to play a role or where to turn for information. The moment is ripe for a coordinated effort to address those needs.

The task before us now is to share what we have learned, and to build on it. It is time to take the first steps toward a vigorous renewal of political engagement for all of America. It is time to implement the strategies this report has outlined; to gather funds, seek allies, fashion coalitions. It is time to launch a campaign that will capture the attention and the imaginations of disaffected citizens in Chicago and beyond, to open the door and invite all Americans, regardless of age or background, to step forward and speak their minds, and help shape the future we will all share.



A Time for Action: *A New Vision of Participatory Democracy*

METHODOLOGY

PURPOSE

The League of Women Voters of Chicago assembled a Project Task Force composed of scholars and professionals with expertise in diverse areas such as academia, business and marketing, community relations, education, and government. (A complete list of Task Force members can be found on the inside front cover.)

The goal of the Project Task Force was to review the existing research on America's current declining levels of voter turnout, civic engagement, and other forms of political participation; identify the causes; and develop appropriate strategies to counter these trends.

The purpose of this study is to raise public awareness of the problem, identify new and creative strategic action opportunities, and provide recommendations for implementation to help reinvigorate our body politic.

METHODS

LWV Chicago employed a full-time researcher to gather and analyze data and provide written reports to the Task Force. The Task Force reviewed the reports, recommended resources, and identified additional areas of research.

The researcher drew on a wide variety of information, methods, and data sources (both qualitative and quantitative) for this project. Most of the data and information were collected using secondary methods (e.g., a review of existing academic studies), then analyzed and compared in the context of the project's mission. The project methodology has evolved in order to incorporate guidance and suggestions from the Task Force. There were three general phases to the project:

- Defining the problem and determining the cause(s) of low political participation.
- Exploring the potential impact of different strategies on levels of civic engagement.
- Developing specific strategy recommendations.

Voter Turnout Trends

To examine voter turnout trends, the study used secondary data from the United States Census Bureau, the Federal Election Commission, and academic literature. The researcher examined trends in historical voting data for presidential elections from 1920, when women's ballots were first officially included, through 2000. The researcher also examined demographic variables such as gender, race, and age.

To further understand current trends, the researcher examined results from recent surveys measuring political attitudes of both voting and non-voting Americans. She also conducted an extensive review of academic literature on the causes of declining voter turnout.

Current Strategies

The researcher used a combination of primary and secondary methods to examine current strategies employed by non-partisan organizations to address the problem. To support the data from academic studies, the researcher contacted nine national and local organizations and conducted informal interviews with program directors to determine what programs and strategies they use, which approaches have proved to be most effective, and whether the organizations performed program evaluations and tracked ongoing data.

The study also surveyed 21 organizations in Chicago, collecting data on programs and activities, staffing and volunteers, funding, and program evaluation. The survey achieved a 52 percent return.

One Task Force member conducted two focus groups, testing participants' ideas on civic engagement, as well as their reactions to brand concepts developed by a Task Force subcommittee. The focus groups were conducted on November 4 and November 5, 2003, at Leo Burnett headquarters in downtown Chicago, among volunteer young adults aged 18-25. Almost every participant was registered to vote and had voted in the 2000 Presidential election. Group One was comprised of five college-educated adults over twenty; four participants had or were currently pursuing Master's degrees. The group included one white male, two white females, one Indian-American female, and one Asian-American female. Group Two was comprised mostly of college students or graduates, as well as one 19-year-old student in a technical school. The group included one African-American male, two African-American females, one white female, and one Asian-American female. At least two of the African-American participants described themselves as coming from disadvantaged communities.

(The purpose of the focus groups was to collect data that would be supplemental to the research project, not to make any new generalizations. The attendees cannot be regarded as representing the broadest possible cross section of the young adult target group, since the sample size was small (n=10) and the participants were volunteers.)

Motivating Change

The researcher distilled effective strategies for social and cultural change in three areas: social marketing campaigns, brand identification, and the use of the Internet as an organizing tool. The researcher used secondary information on social marketing techniques and successful strategies from the academic literature and organizational web sites. Information on branding was obtained via a Task Force member from the Leo Burnett advertising agency.



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APPENDIX A

Definition of Proficiency Levels in Civic Education as defined by the U.S. Department of Education – National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1998. On the Web at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics/>

Achievement Level Policy Definitions

Basic	Partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for Proficient work at each grade.
Proficient	Solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.
Advanced	Superior performance.

Proficiency Levels Defined for Grade 12

Basic	Twelfth-grade students performing at the Basic level should have an understanding of what is meant by civil society, constitutional government, and politics. They should know that constitutional governments can take different forms, and they should understand the fundamental principles of American constitutional government and politics, including functions of political parties and other organizations. They should understand both rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, and they should recognize the value of political participation. They should be familiar with international issues that affect the United States.
Proficient	Twelfth-grade students performing at the Proficient level should have a good understanding of how constitutions can limit the power of government and support the rule of law. They should be able to describe similarities and differences among constitutional systems of government, and they should be able to explain fundamental American democratic values, their applications, and their contribution to expanding political participation. They should understand the structure of American government and be able to evaluate activities of political parties, interest groups, and media in public affairs. They should be able to explain the importance of political participation, public service, and political leadership. They should be able to describe major elements of American foreign policy and the performance of major international organizations.
Advanced	Twelfth-grade students performing at the Advanced level should have a thorough and mature understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of various forms of constitutional democracy. They should be able to explain fully the structure of American government and the political process. They should understand differences between American ideals and realities, and they should be able to explain past and present responses to those differences. They should understand why civic dispositions and individual and collective political actions sustain democracy. They should be able to explain objectives and consequences of American foreign policy.

APPENDIX B

LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS CONTACTED

CHICAGO AREA ORGANIZATIONS

ACORN
American Friends Service Committee
Asian American Institute
Black Youth Vote
Chicago Urban League
Citizens Information Service
Citizen Action/Illinois
Civic Leadership Institute - Northwestern University
Cook County Clerk
Community Renewal Society
Hip Hop PAC
Hispanic Leadership Institute
ICPR
Illinois Campaign for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
Illinois PIRG
Midwest Democracy Center
Mikva Challenge
People for the American Way
Rainbow PUSH
Southside NAACP
Westside NAACP

NATIONAL OR REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

NAACP
National Center for Learning and Citizenship
Southwest Voter Registration Education Project



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