

Youth Civic and Political Engagement

In his book *Democracy and Education*, noted philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey argued that we must not take for granted the formation of the habits and virtues required for democracy. He believed these must be developed by participating in democratic communities—those places where groups of individuals join together around common interests and where there is “free and full interplay” among those holding differing views. Democratic communities were also characterized by dialogue and active experimentation that reflected social concerns.¹¹

Many others have since adopted Dewey’s perspective that this kind of robust community participation is fundamental to the health of a democratic society. To have a government and society that fairly represent and support diverse and sometimes competing needs requires a nation of what Benjamin Barber calls, “small *d* democrats”—citizens who participate at multiple levels both individually and collectively.¹² This includes formal political activities such as voting and informal civic activities such as volunteering, working with others on community issues, and contributing to charity. Sustained, lifelong participation requires a strong sense of commitment to civic engage-

ment, an informed interest in the political and civic issues that affect one's community and country, and a willingness to take action to address local and national problems.

Unfortunately, levels of civic engagement are lower than desirable, most evidently among the young. The Center for Research on Civic Learning and Engagement found that 58 percent of youth aged 15 to 25 were "disengaged," defined as participating in fewer than two types of either electoral (voting, wearing a campaign button, signing an email or written petition) or civic (volunteering, raising money for charity) activities.¹³ On the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment, only 9 percent of high school seniors could list two ways a democratic society benefits from citizen participation.¹⁴

Such disengagement is not confined to youth. A panel of experts convened by the American Political Science Association recently found that "citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge, and enthusiasm, in fewer venues, and less equitably than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity."¹⁵ Clearly, democratic engagement is not guaranteed. Rather, it must be nurtured in each successive generation of young people.

Developmental psychologists suggest that adolescence is an important time for such nurturing to begin because it is a time when youth are thinking about and trying to anticipate their lives as adults and when they are working to understand who they are and how they will relate to society.¹⁶ As Erik Erikson noted, it is a critical time for the development of sociopolitical orientations.¹⁷ Therefore, it is important to assess the extent to which young people are experimenting with the civic and political activities available to them and developing commitments to future participation.