

September 16, 2008

Vibrant democracy needs informed citizens

By Lyla B. Berg

Congress created Constitution Day in 2004 with a provision inserted into an appropriations bill, requiring all schools and universities receiving federal funding to conduct educational programs on Sept. 17 each year. This mandate offers an opportunity to reflect on our democracy — and whether we really have a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

With celebrities imploring youth to "Rock the Vote" and with youth poised to turn out in record numbers, it would be easy to assume that a golden age of youth civic engagement is upon us. Youth turnout rose in almost every state during the primaries, and news networks regularly run segments on the power of the millennials.

Yet two troubling trends underlie the increase in youth turnout. First, we risk being lulled into the false assumption that youth voting is all we need to ensure a healthy democracy. Second, the young people who do vote are disproportionately white and middle or upper class. Both these trends represent serious threats to the legitimacy of American democracy.

Active citizenship demands far more than spending a few minutes in a voting booth. To determine the health of our democracy, we need to ask more of our young people. Are they reading the newspaper? Are they discussing politics and public policy with friends, family, teachers? Are they engaged in local politics? Are they participating in community service?

Despite the signs of hope, the answer to these questions is "not enough." On the recent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP 2006) in civics, two-thirds of students scored below proficient. Less than a third of eighth-graders could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, and less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

These findings are not surprising, given that civic education has declined steadily over the past generation. High-stakes testing and an emphasis on literacy and math dominate school reform. As a result, too many young people do not learn how our political system works, and therefore lack the tools to improve our communities and the nation through their political engagement.

The other untold side of increased youth turnout is the widening civic achievement gap. The NAEP results reveal that non-white students are twice as likely as their white counterparts to score below proficiency on national civics assessments. A similar gap exists based on a student's economic status. This gap represents not only differences in civic knowledge, but also diverging attitudes toward government and the political process. Race and class are, therefore, key factors of citizens' trust in government, resulting in vast disparities of civic participation.

The low participation rates of these demographics mean that their priorities will be the first to be neglected. The young people most likely to be directly affected by government policy — from the war in Iraq to the housing crunch to the lack of affordable healthcare — are also the least prepared to speak up.

This widening chasm is a significant threat to democratic ideals and practice, since we are failing to

empower the poor, minority, and immigrant individuals most in need of high-quality civic learning. Without giving every citizen the tools to make his voice heard, how can we expect our national discourse to represent the values of the entirety of "We the People"?

Under the cloud of No Child Left Behind, civics has taken a back seat to reading and math, leading to the decline in civic knowledge witnessed today. This trend is especially dramatic in less-advantaged communities where the pressures of school assessment are far more acute. In order for our youngest citizens to develop civic dispositions, civic learning must be incorporated throughout students' academic careers.

The more citizens are engaged in the government processes — from addressing issues to meeting with state legislators to volunteering on a presidential campaign — the less opportunity moneyed interests have to fill the vacuum. A democracy of activist citizens is the only way to ensure government heeds the voice: "We the People."

Each generation must take up the mantle of its predecessors. The stakes are too high to allow us to be satisfied with a small increase in youth voter turnout. Our commitment to civic learning will determine whether or not we sustain a healthy democracy well beyond November's election. Only through effective civic learning for every child can we create the type of informed and engaged citizens that will preserve a dynamic democracy for generations to come.

Lyla Berg is vice chairwoman of the state House education committee and is the state facilitator for the Civic Mission of Schools. She is also the state coordinator for Project Citizen with the Center for Civic Education and is the founder and former CEO of Kids Voting Hawaii. She wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.
