

## RESEARCH ROUNDUP

*The Research Roundup column highlights recent research findings commissioned or generated by CIRCLE. Also included is an update on new CIRCLE products such as Fact Sheets, Recommended Research Articles, Recent Research Abstracts, Literature Reviews, and Data Sets.*

### OLD-FASHIONED STRATEGIES PERSUADE LATINO YOUTH TO VOTE

Over the past twenty years, the Latino population has doubled and now constitutes the largest minority group in the United States. Moreover, this population is young, with a median age of 26, and represents a potential bloc of voters who could shape policy for many years to come. So far, unlike immigrant groups in the past, this rapidly expanding group has not realized its own voting power.<sup>1</sup> According to “CIRCLE Working Paper 10: Mobilizing the Latino Youth Vote” by Dr. Melissa Michelson of California State University, Fresno, one powerful way to address the problem of low Latino voter turnout is to “return to old-fashioned personal canvassing efforts.” In particular, the paper presents evidence that Latino youth (ages 18-25) are more likely to vote if asked to do so face-to-face.

#### FINDING WHAT WORKS: THE MESSAGE OR THE MESSENGER?

In the fall of 2002, Michelson conducted a randomized field experiment in Fresno, CA to increase voter turnout among young Latinos. The purpose of the experiment was to determine if the effectiveness of canvassing varies among registered voters of different races and ethnicities. Is canvassing equally effective in getting both registered Latinos and registered voters of other ethnic and racial backgrounds to cast a ballot? In addition, the experiment tried to determine if (1) the race/ethnicity of the canvasser and/or (2) the message delivered by the canvasser had any effect on the number of voters mobilized.

The experiment involved sending forty matched pairs of canvassers (either two Latinos or two non-Latinos) door-to-door during the final two weekends before the gubernatorial election to urge registered young people to vote. Each voter was randomly assigned to receive one of two messages. They were either given a message stressing civic duty or one that stressed community solidarity.

#### LATINO ACTIVISTS SUCCESSFULLY MOBILIZE LATINO VOTERS

Michelson found that going door-to-door and asking registered voters to vote on Election Day indeed led to increased turnout among young Latinos. In addition, the study revealed that Latinos

were more likely to vote if contacted by another Latino than if contacted by someone of another ethnicity.<sup>2</sup>

Latino canvassers were also more effective in getting potential voters, especially Latino voters, to open their door to listen to the canvassers’ message. This could be due to a number of reasons. Michelson states, “It is possible that Latino residents were more likely to open their door if approached by other Latinos or it could be that the Latino canvassers were more comfortable in these neighborhoods and thus had more effective strategies for making contact with potential voters.”

Finally, the study revealed that the content of the mobilization message appears to not have an effect on turnout. Those who received the civic duty message were no more or less likely to vote than those receiving the community solidarity message. Michelson’s findings indicate that the fundamental key to increasing Latino turnout lies in increasing the face-to-face contact with Latino voter activists. She concludes, “Turnout rates for young Latinos [are] likely to remain low unless dramatic changes are made to get-out-the-vote efforts. In order to increase Latino turnout, more Latinos need to have face-to-face contact with a voter mobilization activist. In order to have a real impact on the young Latino vote, these efforts must be made by Latino activists.”

A copy of the paper can be downloaded from CIRCLE’s Web site ([www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)). 

### SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE CIVIC ACTION

Written for educators and researchers alike, “CIRCLE Working Paper 06: The Role of Civic Skills in Fostering Civic Engagement” by Dr. Mary Kirlin takes a look at what we know and don’t know about the skills that are crucial for active participation in civic life. The paper gives a comprehensive snapshot of the broad and varied research findings on civic skills—skills that enable people to take effective civic action such as writing letters to a member of Congress or defending a position on a public issue. In addition, the paper includes a new typology of civic skills and provides direction for future research. A copy of the paper can be downloaded from CIRCLE’s Web site ([www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)).

<sup>1</sup> The Latino population in the United States faces two barriers to voting that will likely be overcome in the future. First, a large portion of the population is below the legal voting age of 18. Second, many Latinos living in the United States are currently ineligible to vote because they have not yet become naturalized citizens. For more information see *CIRCLE Fact Sheet: Electoral Engagement Among Latino Youth*.

<sup>2</sup> The only canvassing efforts that had a statistically significant impact on voter turnout were the Latino-on-Latino personal contacts.

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## FROM YOUTH PROGRAMS TO POLITICAL SCIENCE, A BROAD INTEREST IN CIVIC SKILLS EXISTS

The literature review gives a wide-ranging synopsis of the most important research findings to date on civic skills. Covering the work of educators, experiential program leaders, psychologists, political scientists, and those who study youth development, Kirlin maps out how these experts connect civic skills to civic engagement. She finds that each discipline has made important first steps in documenting which skills young people need to develop in order to lead active civic and political lives.

For example, education researchers have investigated what students *should* know about civics and what students *actually* know. Their work formed the backbone of both the National Standards for Civic Education and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). At the same time, political scientists such as Verba, Schlozman and Brady<sup>1</sup> conducted ground-breaking research that helped to define and measure the concept of civic skills. Finally, developmental psychologists along with experiential program leaders have documented how young people practice and develop civic skills through their involvement in local groups, organizations, and institutions. Approaching the subject from different angles, the various disciplines provide a rich yet dispersed discussion of the skills one needs to be active in civic and political life.

## CREATING A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CIVIC SKILLS

In addition to bringing together what different fields and disciplines know about civic skills, Kirlin organizes and synthesizes the many divergent findings. The result is a typology of civic skills (see page 6) made up of the four dominant skill categories that emerged in the research: organization, communication, collective decision-making, and critical thinking. While the typology was originally designed to help researchers examine the different environments in which civic skills are acquired, it can also be used by school and youth program administrators interested in a quick list of specific civic skills.

## FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS: MOVING BEYOND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

According to Kirlin, “The literature about civic skills is very promising but leaves many unanswered questions.” Following is a sample of observations included in the literature review about the state of knowledge concerning civic skills as well as questions to be explored in future research.

1. Civic skills are not well defined. Verba et al provide a very good beginning for defining communication skills, and an acceptable start for identifying organization skills, but more remains to be done in the remaining categories of collective decision-making and critical thinking.
2. We need to better understand how to measure many of the items that are emerging as civic skills. For example, how do we measure whether an individual possesses the civic skills needed to effectively work in a collective decision-making arena?
3. The various disciplines have different ideas about how civic skills relate to broader questions of civic engagement, civic socialization, and political participation. A cross-disciplinary approach is likely to be the most fruitful for obtaining more complete answers, especially about the process of civic skill acquisition for adolescents.
4. Ultimately, this research is useful not only for understanding factors in political participation, but also for encouraging political participation. Thus, civic definitions must eventually be linked to pedagogical, curricular, and program design elements and subsequently made available to teachers and program developers. ★

## EDUCATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: DOES PUBLIC INVESTMENT PAY OFF?

Political scientists have long shown that people with higher levels of educational attainment tend to vote at higher rates, know more about how the government works, and overall are more civically engaged. In fact, a major reason for establishing public schools was the belief that education boosts citizenship. Two new CIRCLE

<sup>1</sup> Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.