

Civic Engagement and Political Leadership among Women – a Call for Solutions

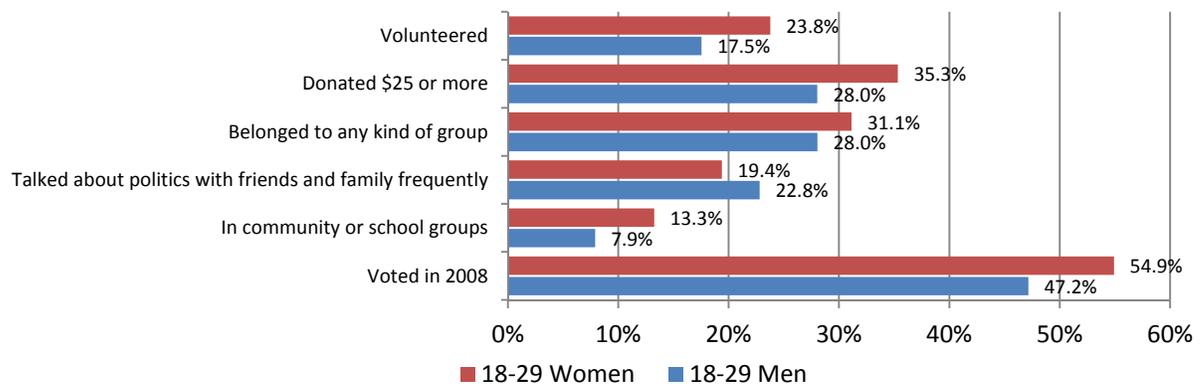
*This fact sheet reflects remarks by author Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg at an April 22, 2013 White House Conference on Girls' Leadership and Civic Education, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and the Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

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Just decades ago American women and girls suffered from grave inequality in the social, political, and economic systems that affected their lives, particularly in education and the workplace. This situation has shifted a lot thanks to tireless advocacy and activism of many people. Today, girls are ahead of boys in academic achievement: According to the U.S. Department of Education, 57.2% of the Bachelors' degrees granted in 2010 went to women.¹ Women also made up 57% of the students enrolled in college in the fall of 2010.² Women have achieved parity or near parity in entering elite pipelines like business and law schools in the U.S.³ Gender differences persist in academia, but much progress has been made.⁴

Figure 1: Gender Difference in Civic and Voter Participation (CPS 2008-2011 data)



Figures based on CIRCLE's calculator of Current Population Survey microdata (2008-2011).

Girls and young women are also ahead of their male counterparts on many indicators of civic engagement, including volunteering, membership in community associations,⁵ and voting (Figure 1). The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) surveys show that female college students spend more time than male students on volunteer service and value helping others in need more strongly.⁶ In fact, in college, women are more likely to take a course that involves community service (54% v. 47.2%),⁷ and after college, women are overrepresented in intensive service programs like AmeriCorps⁸ and Teach for America.⁹ The National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics test results indicate that girls perform as well as, if not better than, boys on civic knowledge tests.¹⁰

However, despite their high level of civic engagement, women are not visible among political leaders of our country. According to research from the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University, women are severely underrepresented at virtually all levels of elected offices,¹¹ and their representation has leveled off in recent years.¹² Furthermore, research consistently shows that girls and women are less likely than men to aspire to a political career,¹³ need greater encouragement to do so from parties, family, and other sources, and take less traditional routes to running for office,¹⁴ which partially explains why women are not at the table when important policy decisions are made. Leadership gaps do not just affect political careers, either – we see the same pattern of high achievement yet underrepresentation in the corporate sector,¹⁵ law, and higher education.¹⁶ A 2009 report that analyzed women’s leadership in ten sectors – academic, business, film, journalism, law, military, nonprofit, politics, religion, and sports – found that women’s leadership numbers remained static at an average of 18% across all ten sectors.¹⁷

This fact sheet summarizes past research and new CIRCLE findings related to civic and political engagement among girls and women. We first identify gaps that explain gender disparities in leadership and then summarize available evidence for practices especially relevant for promoting political leadership among girls and women.

Challenges

A casual glance at civic engagement data related to women suggests that there is no problem, which is simply not the case when we examine the figures more closely and put them in the context of female underrepresentation in elected political leadership positions. We identify five major challenges that partially explain why women are missing from political leadership despite the fact that they lead men in most indicators of civic engagement.

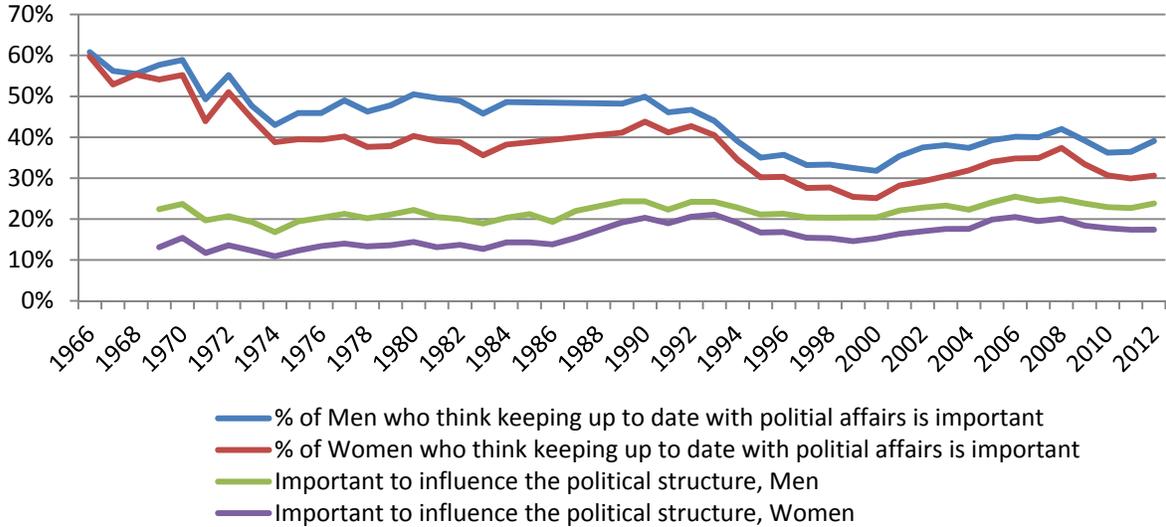
1. Interest Gap

First, young women are much less likely to engage in politics. According to the data available from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), young college women talk about politics less than college men, value keeping up with political news less highly, and are less likely to think that it is important for them to change the political structure (Figure 2). Women are also less likely to consider a political career as a distant future goal. The gender gap in discussion of political issues is actually expanding (Figure 3). In the meantime, men and women have become indistinguishable when measured by some important indicators of overall life priorities, such as the importance of becoming financially well-off and developing a meaningful philosophy of life (Figure 4). A recent report from American University also showed that female college students show far less interest in pursuing elected offices such as mayor or congressperson.¹⁸

It is important to note that women are no less interested in effectuating social change. For example, the HERI data show that women are more interested in changing social values and

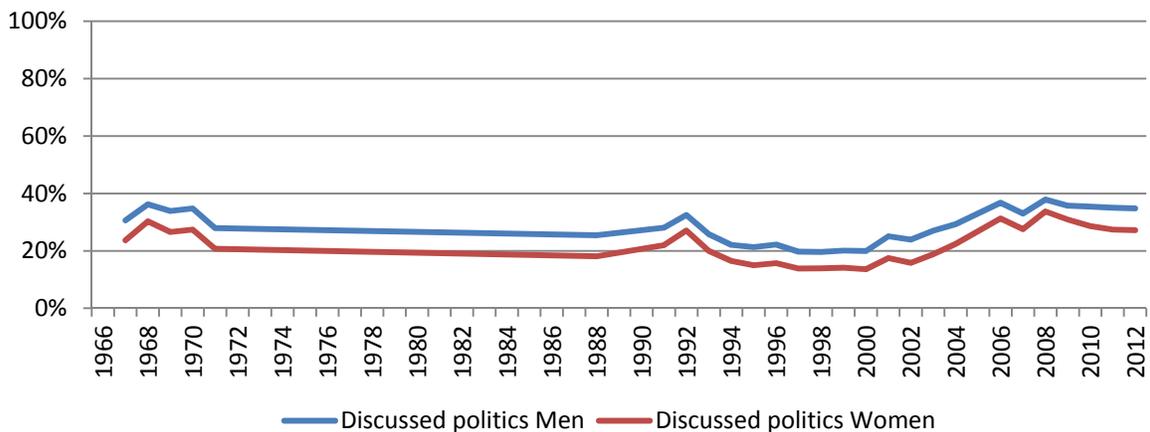
participating in a community action program than men. It does appear, however, that women are less active than men in various types of political engagement indicators, and qualitative findings suggest women prefer or are sometimes forced to lead from behind the scene, rather than from the top.¹⁹ A study of candidates from the CAWP also found that men were likely to have a longstanding desire to hold elective office, while women most often made the decision to run based on their concerns about public policy issues²⁰

Figure 2: Changes in College Freshmen's Interest in Politics by Gender (1966-2012)



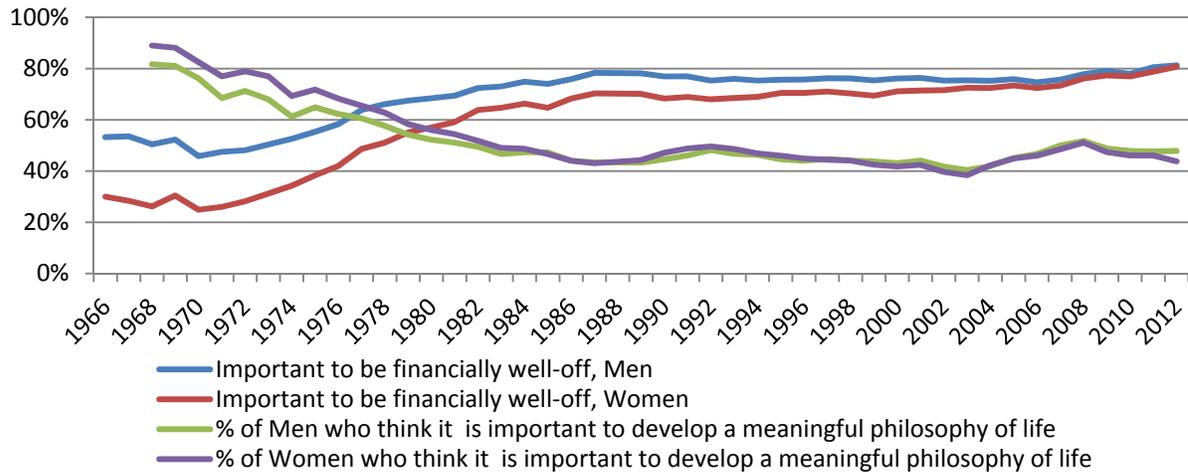
Figures based on HERI's official reporting of gender-aggregate data, 1966-2012

Figure 3: Gender difference in % of first-years discussing politics



Figures based on HERI's official reporting of gender-aggregate data, 1966-2012

Figure 4: Gender differences have disappeared in some indicators since the 1960s

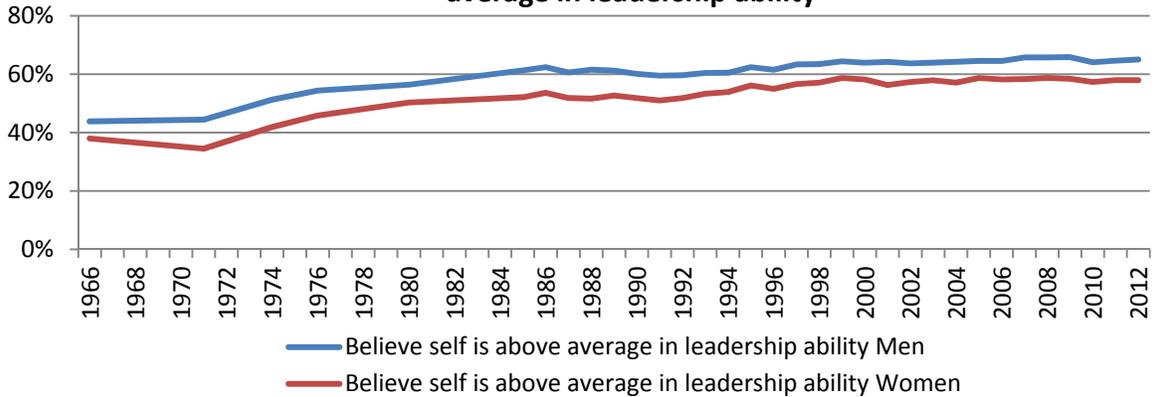


Figures based on HERI's official reporting of gender-aggregate data, 1966-2012

2. Confidence Gap

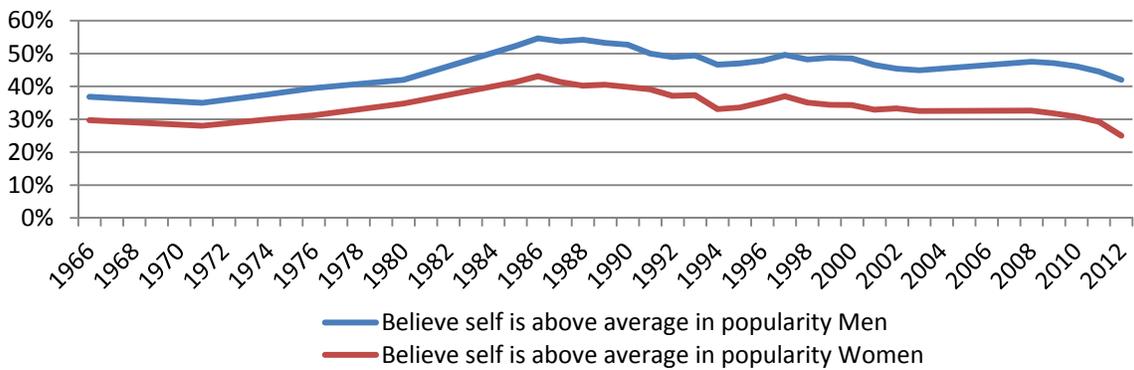
Second, women are far less likely to claim personal characteristics such as leadership and public speaking skills, competitiveness, social skills, and popularity (Figures 5-7), all of which are commonly named characteristics of a political leader.²¹ These gender gaps have not narrowed since 1966 when HERI started to survey first-year college students. The lack of self-confidence in political leadership potential among women is staggering when we overlay this data with the public's view of women as potential leaders. According to a Pew Research study, the American public believes that women are more qualified than men in many leadership traits such as honesty, intelligence, and creativity.²² In the American University study, women were less likely to feel that they would be qualified than men to run for an office even if they had job-related experience and skills.²³ Finally, there is no indication that college education shrinks gender gaps. The HERI data from the class of 2009 (first-year students in 2005) indicates that women's perception of their own leadership skills does not increase over their college years, while men increase their confidence over time (Figure 8).

Figure 5: % of college women and men who believe they are above average in leadership ability



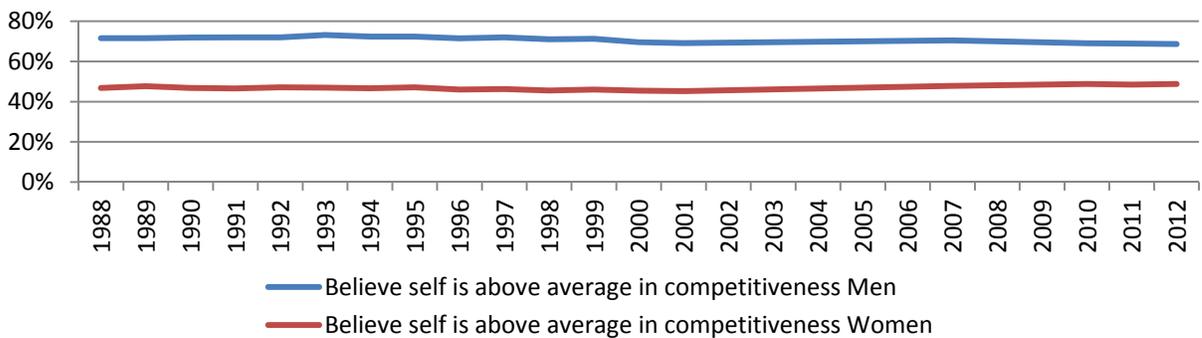
Figures based on HERI's official reporting of gender-aggregate data, 1966-2012

Figure 6: % of college women and men who believe they are above average in popularity



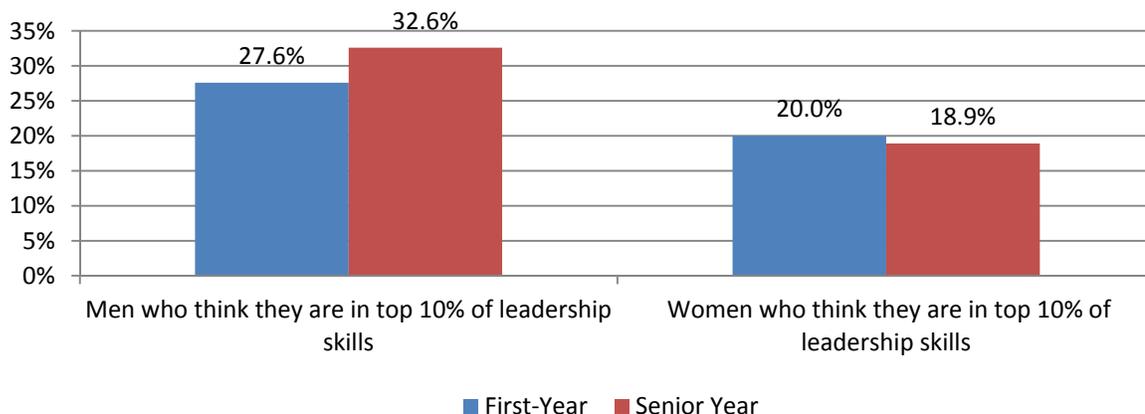
Figures based on HERI's official reporting of gender-aggregate data, 1966-2012

Figure 7: % of college women and men who believe they are above average in competitiveness



Figures based on HERI's official reporting of gender-aggregate data, 1966-2012

**Figure 8: Gender Gap in Leadership Confidence Expands during College Years
(HERI 2009 cohort data)**



Figures drawn from the HERI College Senior Survey, National aggregates tables, p.98. Data are based on the first-year survey and college senior survey administered for the class of 2009 cohort.)

3. Expectations Gap

According to the aforementioned study from American University, 30% of young college women have ever been encouraged to run for a political office by anyone, compared to 40% among men. The same study found that women were less likely to be encouraged by parents, grandparents, teachers, religious leaders, coaches, and even friends. Interestingly, women are just as likely to be encouraged to run for student government positions as men.²⁴ The same pattern can be found in the data about leadership in college administration, law and corporate leadership, where women are represented, at least to a certain extent, as Assistant and Associate Deans,²⁵ law clerks,²⁶ and managers,²⁷ but not as college presidents,²⁸ managing partners of law firms or judges, and as CEOs.²⁹ In other words, women are expected to achieve a certain level of leadership, but not the highest level.³⁰ The aforementioned Pew study also showed that women are far less likely to believe that women would make good political leaders (6%) than men (21%) though the same survey respondents believed that women are generally more likely to have strong leadership traits.³¹

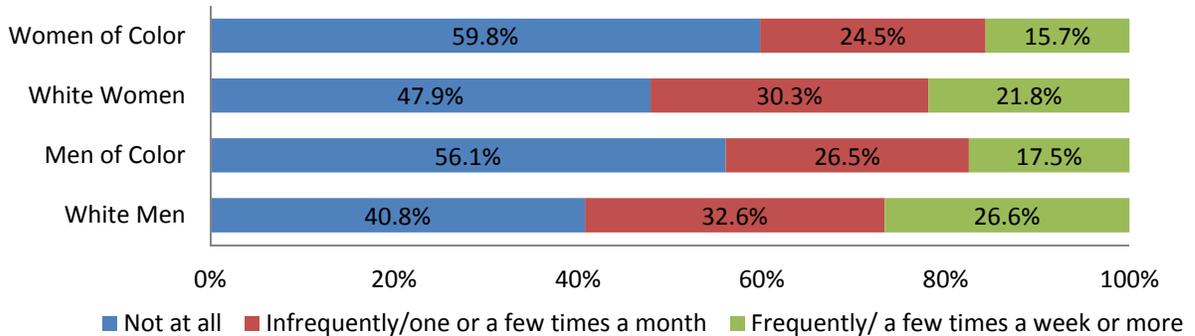
4. Race and Class Gap

Women represent diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. We found large gaps in civic engagement levels among women of different backgrounds, and treating women as a homogeneous group can mask just how disadvantaged some women are in the civic and political leadership pipelines. When we simply compare women and men without considering their racial backgrounds or socioeconomic background (such as family affluence and educational attainment levels), some serious race and class gaps among women can be overlooked.

According to our analysis of the Census Current Population Survey data, two-thirds of young White women had *any* conversations about political issues with friends and family, but only half of women of color did (Figure 9). Young women of color were half as likely as White women to participate in a meeting where political issues were discussed and participate in rallies or marches, even in 2008 when young people were highly mobilized by the presidential election. Women of color were less likely to take formal and informal political actions, such as contacting public officials or participating in a boycott or buycott. White

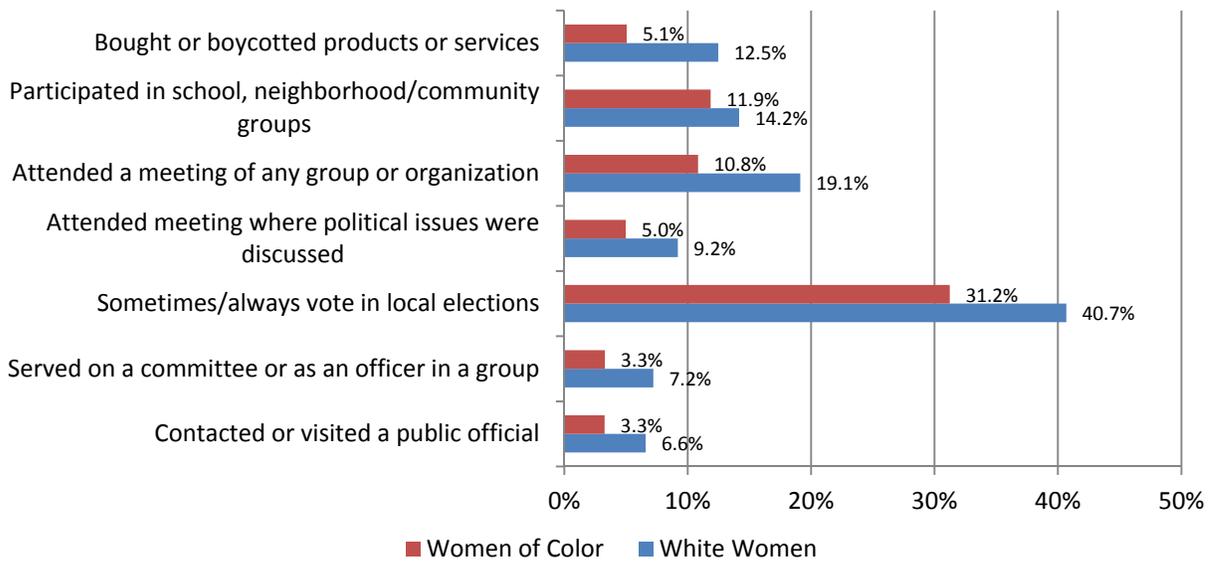
women were twice as likely as women of color to take a leadership role in the community or even attend a meeting of a group or organizations (Figure 10). A much larger portion of young women of color are isolated within their own communities than White women: Nearly quarter (24%) of young women of color said they trusted no one in their neighborhoods, compared to just 9% of young White women. A fifth of young women of color never saw or heard from family and friends, while only 9% of white women were in the same category.³²

Figure 9: Discussion of Political Issues with Family and Friends among 18-29 Year Olds, by Gender and Race



Source: CIRCLE's analysis of the Current Population Survey, November 2011 microdata

Figure 10: Rates of Civic and Political Participation Among Young Women by Race (CPS 2008-09, 2011)



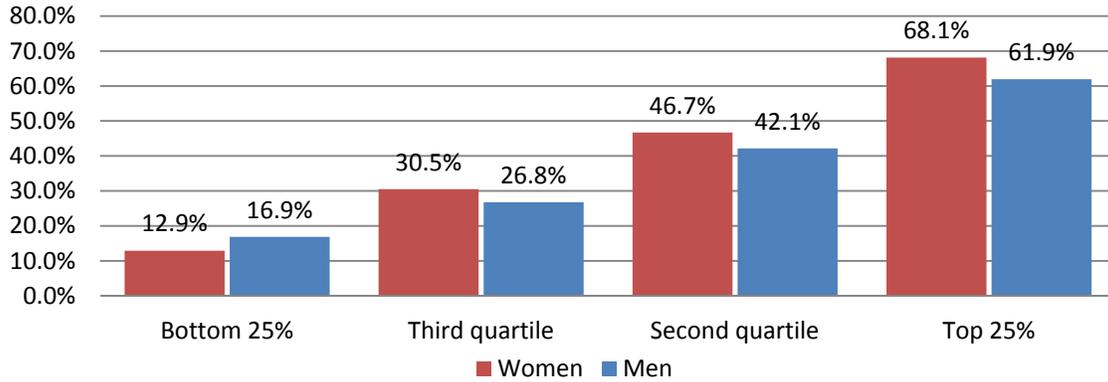
Source: CIRCLE's analysis of the Current Population Survey, November 2008-09 and 2011 microdata

Disparities by Class are Large

In our survey of young people immediately following the 2012 election, we found that young women who came from least affluent family backgrounds were far less likely than women from more affluent families to feel encouraged to discuss current events, engage in debates

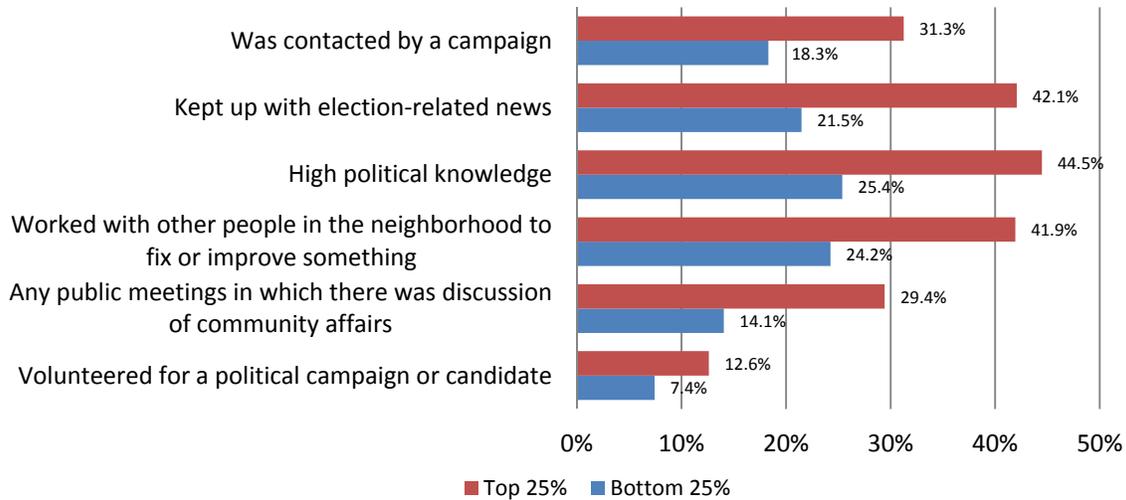
on critical issues, or vote (Figure 11).³³ The women who came from the lowest quartile of socioeconomic background were also less likely to engage in virtually all forms of civic and political engagement, as shown in Figure 12.

Figure 11: Parental Support for Discussion, Disagreement and Voting by Gender and SES (% receiving high level of support)



Source: CIRCLE’s calculation of the survey data collected for the Commission on Youth Voting and Political Participation. All participants were Americans aged 18 to 24.

Figure 12: Disparities Among Young Women in Civic and Political Participation by Socioeconomic Class



Source: CIRCLE’s calculation of the survey data collected for the Commission on Youth Voting and Political Participation. All participants were Americans aged 18 to 24.

5. Measurement Gap

The final challenge is that we currently do not measure qualities and skills that are relevant for civic and political leadership because virtually all of the standardized tests are designed to measure factual civic knowledge. At present, students in 21 states must take a

standardized social studies test, but only eight states require a civics/American government test.³⁴ Based on boys' and girls' performance on a very similar test, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Civics assessment, girls are likely to perform as well as boys do, and educational reform often results from the documentation of serious achievement gaps. The most prevalent types of tests today will not identify the gap in leadership skills or differences in interest and motivation for political leadership. Nor will these tests identify areas of strength for girls.

We would want to know whether boys and girls are on the same trajectory for leadership aspirations, collaboration, communication, and deliberation skills, as well as motivation to become politically engaged. That would allow us to investigate when the gender gaps start to appear. We cannot assume that girls and boys are doing equally well on these skills and constructs based solely on their civics test scores because the measurements miss potential gaps in these areas.

Promoting Best Practice and Future Agenda

Ten years ago, the Civic Mission of Schools challenged K-12 institutions to better prepare students to be competent and responsible citizens, identifying for educators six promising practices in civic education. Since then, our colleagues have made much progress, both in understanding what works and in creating innovative ways for students to acquire civic knowledge, skills and dispositions.³⁵ Recently, a useful report from Education Commission of the States described various practices of "New Civics."³⁶

In this newer framing of civics, students not only gain knowledge about the structure and function of the government and how laws are made from textbooks; they can also approach these important topics using alternative methods, such as community-based projects and experiences, games, peer learning, and role playing.

Students are also known to develop into civically and politically engaged young adults when they discuss current events, including controversial issues that are relevant to them.³⁷ Through these occasions, students can not only learn about issues but also practice how to disagree respectfully, understand the perspectives of others, argue their points, find common ground, and act collaboratively for change.

Leaders of civic learning from all sectors are calling for renewed focus on civic learning and engagement in schools, colleges and universities, and communities. *A Crucible Moment*, a landmark 2012 report by Department of Education and Association for American Colleges and Universities, challenges colleges and universities to reclaim their civic mission by expanding our traditional approach to college-level civic education.³⁸ The report urges educators to teach civic literacy, inquiry, and action and to facilitate students' self-understanding, readiness for action, and understanding of diverse contexts. The U.S. Department of Education affirmed the need for renewed attention to civic learning for young people of all backgrounds in its 2012 report, *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: Road Map and Call to Action*.³⁹ While it is critical that we educate *all* young people to become civically and politically engaged, we must continue to address the between- and within-gender gaps so that American women and men of all backgrounds have equal opportunities to participate and shape the social, political, and economic systems that affect their lives. Our findings make it clear that we have much to improve.

In this paper, we identified five major gaps that may partly explain why women are civically active yet underrepresented in political office. We know very little about what strategies are effective for addressing these gaps. However, the following research findings have some implications:

- By the time women are of college age, the gender gaps are very large, and there is no evidence that college education diminishes these gaps. This means that strategies to reduce the gender gap in political leadership should address girls who are much younger than college age.
- Research shows that girls and women, on average, are more likely to engage in grass-roots community action through volunteering and through community-based organizations. Women also show a stronger desire to help those who are in need than men. One way to leverage these strengths might be to create a pipeline and structure through which young women who get involved in the community receive support, encouragement, and mentoring to become political leaders who can change laws, policies, or systems to benefit more people.
- More research focused on women and girls' civic engagement could address many of the remaining questions related to this topic. For example, it is not well-understood how girls and boys perceive civics instruction in early grades, and whether teachers provide instruction in civics the same way to boys and girls. Furthermore, more research should be done to understand whether and how much gender-specific instruction (e.g., learning about female political leaders) and programs (e.g., Girl Scouts) affect girls' motivation, perceived ability, and desire to pursue careers as elected officials.⁴⁰
- Finally, research and practice should continue to focus on the large race and class disparities among women in both civic engagement and political representation. It is critical that we promote leadership by women in general, but if we fail to address race and class gaps, we will preserve uneven representation of women's voices and issues in the future.

Endnotes

¹ US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2011) *Earned Degrees Conferred, 1869-70 through 2020-21* (Table 283). Available at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_283.asp . Women earn 60% of the Masters' degrees and 50% of the PhDs granted

² US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2011) *Total Fall Enrollment, Selected Years, 1947 through 2010* (Table 198). Available at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_198.asp.

³ American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession (2012). *A current glance at women in the law*. Available at http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/marketing/women/current_glance_statistics_2012.authcheckdam.pdf.

⁴ For example, women are under-represented in most STEM doctoral degree conferrals. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=women-earning-greater-share-stem-degrees-doctorates-remain-gender-skewed>. Also see Curtis, J.W. (2011). *Persistent inequity: Gender and academic employment* . Report from the American Association of the College Professors. Available at: http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/08E023AB-E6D8-4DBD-99A0-24E5EB73A760/0/persistent_inequity.pdf. Figure 1 on page 19 shows that the women take up the majority of earned degrees at associates, bachelor's, master's and doctorate levels.

⁵ CIRCLE tabulation of Census 2011 (civic engagement), 2008, and 2010 (voting) data. For more details on the voting statistics, see <http://www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/235-2/>.

⁶ Data for the figures from the HERI data tables presented in Pryor, J.H. et al., (2009). *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends*. Available at: <http://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/40TrendsManuscript.pdf>. The data for the subsequent years (2007-2012) were drawn from supplemental tables from the annual *American Freshman Reports* supplemental tables, available at <http://heri.ucla.edu/tfsPublications.php>. Los Angeles, CA: Cooperative Institutional Research Program Higher Education Research Institute at University of California.

⁷ The Higher Education Research Institution (2010). *Findings from the 2009 Administration of the College Senior Survey (CSS): National Aggregates*. Available at: http://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/Reports/2009_CSS_Report.pdf.

⁸ The Corporation for National and Community Service (2008). *Still Serving: Measuring the Eight-Year Impact of AmeriCorps on Alumni*. Available at http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/08_0513_longstudy_report.pdf.

⁹ 69% of Teach for America Corp members are women. Source: <http://www.teachforamerica.org/assets/documents/FY11.KIPP.OP.pdf>.

¹⁰ National Center for Educational Statistics (2011). *The nation's report card: Civics 2010*. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsin19fo.asp?pubid=2011466>. Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2013). *Do Promising Practices Boost NAEP Civics Performance?* CIRCLE Fact Sheet. Medford, MA: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement. Available at <http://civicyouth.org>

¹¹ http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/documents/elective.pdf

¹² Sanbonmatsu, K., Carroll, S.J., Walsh, D. (2009). *Poised to run. Women's pathways to state legislatures*. New Brunswick, NJ: Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University. <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/research/reports/PoisedtoRun.pdf>

¹³ Lawless, J. & Fox, R. (2013). *Girls just wanna not run: The gender gap in young Americans' political ambition*. Washington, DC: American University. Available at http://www.american.edu/spa/wpi/upload/Girls-Just-Wanna-Not-Run_Policy-Report.pdf.

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- ¹⁴ Sanbonmatsu, K., Carroll, S.J., & Walsh, D. (2009). *Ibid.* .
- ¹⁵ Catalyst (2013). *U.S. Women in Business*. Available at <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/us-women-business>. The graph shows that just 4.2% of the CEO's of American corporations are women.
- ¹⁶ American Bar Association (2012), *ibid*; Curtis, J.W. (2011). *Persistent inequity: Gender and academic employment* . Report from the American Association of the College Professors. Available at: http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/08E023AB-E6D8-4DBD-99A0-24E5EB73A760/0/persistent_inequity.pdf. Figure 8 on page 26 shows that the women represent less than 25% of college presidents, and at doctorate-granting institutions, women represent just 14%. Furthermore, the portion of women representing college presidents has been overall unchanged since 1998.
- ¹⁷ The White House Project (2009). *Benchmarking Women's Leadership*. Available at <http://www.benchmarks.whitehouseproject.org>
- ¹⁸ Lawless, J. & Fox, R. (2013). *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Princeton University Steering Committee on Undergraduate Women's Leadership (2011). Report of the steering committee on undergraduate women's leadership. Princeton, NJ: Author. Available at http://www.princeton.edu/reports/2011/leadership/documents/SCUWL_Report_Final.pdf
- ²⁰ Sanbonmatsu, K., Carroll, S.J., & Walsh, D. (2009). *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Data for the figures from the HERI data tables presented in Pryor, J.H. et al., (2009). *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends*. Available at: <http://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/40TrendsManuscript.pdf>. The data for the subsequent years (2007-2012) were drawn from supplemental tables from the annual *American Freshman Reports* supplemental tables, available at <http://heri.ucla.edu/tfsPublications.php>. Los Angeles, CA: Cooperative Institutional Research Program Higher Education Research Institute at University of California.
- ²² Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends (2008). *A paradox in public attitudes. Men or women: Who's better leader?* Available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/gender-leadership.pdf>
- ²³ Lawless, J., & Fox, R. (2013). *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Furthermore, women need more encouragement by parties, public officials and organizations before making the decision to run for office, further exacerbating the gender gaps in early encouragement to consider pursuing a political career. See Sanbonmatsu et al., (2009). *ibid.*
- ²⁵ Curtis, J.W. (2011). *Persistent inequity: Gender and academic employment* . Report from the American Association of the College Professors. Available at: http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/08E023AB-E6D8-4DBD-99A0-24E5EB73A760/0/persistent_inequity.pdf
- ²⁶ American Bar Association – Commission on Women in the Profession (2013). *A current glance at women in the law*. Available at www.americanbar.org/women.
- ²⁷ Catalyst (2013). *U.S. Women in Business*. Available at <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/us-women-business>
- ²⁸ Dominici, F., Fried, L.P., & Zeger, S.L. (2009). So few women leaders. *Academe*, 95(7). Available at <http://www.aaup.org/article/so-few-women-leaders>.
- ²⁹ Catalyst (2013). *ibid.*
- ³⁰ Lawless, J., & Fox, R. (2013). *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends (2008). *A paradox in public attitudes. Men or women: Who's better leader?* Available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/gender-leadership.pdf>

³² Findings based on author's tabulation of the Census Current Population Survey data (2011).

³³ For more findings from CIRCLE's survey of 4384 citizens aged 18 to 24, please see <http://www.civicyouth.org/high-school-civic-education-linked-to-voting-participation-and-political-knowledge-no-effect-on-partisanship-or-candidate-selection/>

³⁴ Godsay et al. (2012) – civics policy fact sheet –CIRCLE Fact Sheet. Available at: <http://www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/>

³⁵ Gibson & Levine (2003). *The civic mission of schools*. Available at: <http://www.civicyouth.org/special-report-the-civic-mission-of-schools/>

³⁶ Education Commission of the States (2013). The new civics. *The Progress of Education Report* , 14(2). Available at: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/06/96/10696.pdf>

³⁷ See <http://www.civicyouth.org/high-school-civic-education-linked-to-voting-participation-and-political-knowledge-no-effect-on-partisanship-or-candidate-selection/>

³⁸ The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012). *A crucible moment: College learning and democracy's future*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Available at: http://www.aacu.org/civic_learning/crucible/documents/crucible_508F.pdf.

³⁹ U.S. Department of Education (2012). *Advancing civic learning and engagement in democracy. A road map and call to action*. Washington, DC: Author. Available at: <http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/road-map-call-to-action.pdf>

⁴⁰ In 2012, the Girl Scout Research Institute published *Girl scouting works: An alumnae report*, in which they conclude that Girl Scout alumnae display positive outcomes to a greater degree than non-alumnae in several areas including volunteerism and voting. The study did not, however, specifically address political ambition or leadership skills. The study is available at http://www.girlscouts.org/research/pdf/girl_scouting_works_the_alumnae_impact_study.pdf