

CALIFORNIA



CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

"Hunkering Down:" Volunteering and Civic Engagement During Turbulent Economic Times

2009



2009 CALIFORNIA'S CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

“HUNKERING DOWN:” VOLUNTEERING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT DURING TURBULENT ECONOMIC TIMES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Pete Peterson
Common Sense California

Megan Thorall
Center for California Studies

Justin Ewers
California Forward

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Widely considered to be “ground zero” of the nation’s mortgage and foreclosure crisis, California over the last year and a half has been forced to confront fiscal challenges on a scale unmatched nationally. From the near “ghost town” housing developments in the state’s inland valleys to the closed storefronts and historic levels of joblessness in the usually popular coastal cities, the state’s economic woes have been the central topic—and singular focus—of all political discussion. Confronted by double-digit unemployment, multi-billion state budget shortfalls, and increasingly restive voters, it is no wonder Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger over the last year has warned of impending “financial Armageddon.”¹

But how has this historic downturn impacted civic life in California?

For such a large, diverse state, the expected pullback has not been as dramatic as many feared. Among the most important conclusions of sociologist Robert Putnam’s provocative national study of civic participation, *E Pluribus Unum*, published two years ago, was his finding that there is a striking, inverse relationship between ethnic diversity and civic participation. “In the short run,” Putnam wrote, “new evidence from the U.S. suggests that in ethnically diverse neighborhoods, residents of all races tend to ‘hunker down’. Trust (even of one’s own race) is lower; altruism and community cooperation rarer; friends fewer.”² Putnam’s research revealed that three of the four lowest scoring cities in his participation scoring index were in California (Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco).

As the recession has swept through the economy, much of the country has found itself “hunkering down” to ride out the downturn, and California is no exception. One of the most ethnically diverse societies in the world is struggling through one of the most challenging economic periods in its history. Suffice to say, the state faces distinct challenges when it comes to engaging its residents.

Still, while a study of California’s “civic health” in 2008 reveals a widespread retreat by many Californians from the state’s civic life—with just under three in four Californians saying they have cut back on the time they spent volunteering, participating in groups, and doing the other civic activities—it also shows some surprisingly positive responses to this historic event. Among the highlights of this report:

Voter turnout: In a surge of public participation surrounding last year’s presidential election, a record 13.7 million of the state’s voters went to the polls—continuing California’s more than 40-year run as the largest contributor of voters of any state in the country. The 79.4 percent turnout among registered voters was the second highest proportion in state history, second only to the 1964 presidential race between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater.³

Low-income engagement: It is no surprise that people in households with annual incomes under \$50,000 have become less engaged in civic life in the last year. But in California, the engagement gap between those with low- and high-incomes is not quite as clear-cut as it may seem. Though the recession has impacted low-income workers more than any other group, they were far more likely to serve in more personal ways than those with higher incomes—by opening up their homes to relatives, for example, or feeding neighbors—and 61% provided food, shelter, or money to another person.

Immigrant participation: California’s massive population of new immigrants has also added another wrinkle to the state’s overall engagement trends. While recent immigrants have historically been less engaged in civic life than native-born citizens, in immigrant-rich California, this seems to be changing. Immigrants were slightly less likely to serve as volunteers than non-immigrants, but they were more likely to be involved in their communities in other ways, with more than one in three immigrants saying they had attended a club or community meeting in the last year and nearly one in five saying they had worked with others on pressing issues in their community.

Minority confidence: While the tumultuous last year has brought government at all levels under scrutiny—with only 13% of Californians saying they have “a great deal of confidence” in the federal government to spend the billions of dollars of stimulus money wisely—local government seems to have earned a surprisingly high level of trust in California, particularly among minorities. While only 24% of whites say they trust local government to do the right thing most of the time or just about always, nearly 35% of African Americans and Hispanics have the same confidence in local officials.⁴

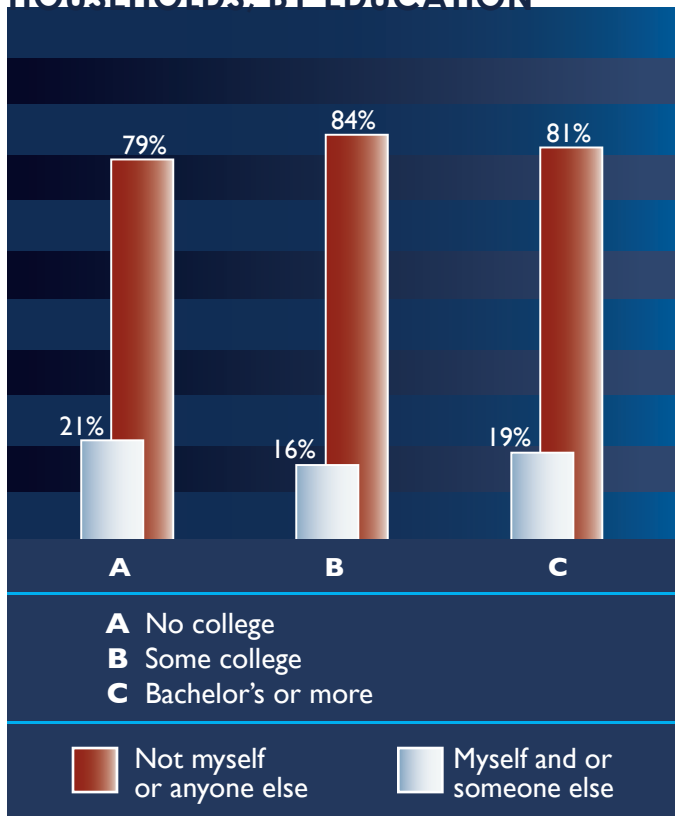
HOW ARE VOLUNTEERING & ENGAGEMENT CHANGING?

During trying economic times, civic health suffers, and Californians have joined a broad national trend by turning inward and cutting back on civic engagement.

In our survey:

72.5% (72% nationally) of Californian respondents said they cut back on the time they spent volunteering, participating in groups, and doing the other civic activities. This does not mean that 73% have stopped participating, only that they are participating less. More than one in four Californians, meanwhile, say they have increased their engagement in the past year.

LAYOFFS IN CALIFORNIA HOUSEHOLDS. BY EDUCATION



The source of this general decline is no mystery, of course.

20% of respondents in the state said someone in their household lost their job in the last year, the same percentage as nationally. Among Hispanic respondents, 34% said their homes had been affected by layoffs. Overall, layoffs and foreclosures made it more difficult for 35% of Californians to afford food or medication (compared to 31% nationally). The state's 11.9% unemployment rate (as of July 2009) makes it one of the five most difficult states in the country to find a job.⁵

The result, across the state, has been widespread retrenchment, though a slightly less dramatic one than that seen nationally.

61% of respondents (66% nationally) said people in their community are responding to the current economic downturn by looking out for themselves. Only 18% (19% nationally) replied that people around them are responding to the recession by helping each other more.

A Closer Look: Great Consistency- Across Income, Education, Ethnicity- in Decreased Participation

This general pullback from civic engagement holds true across a variety of demographic groups, as people of all ages, races, and incomes seem to be volunteering less and focusing more on providing for themselves and their families. In some ways, this should be seen as further evidence of the wide-ranging nature of California's recession. From highly educated engineers in Silicon Valley to lower-skilled workers in the state's service industries, everyone is feeling the effects of the downturn.⁶

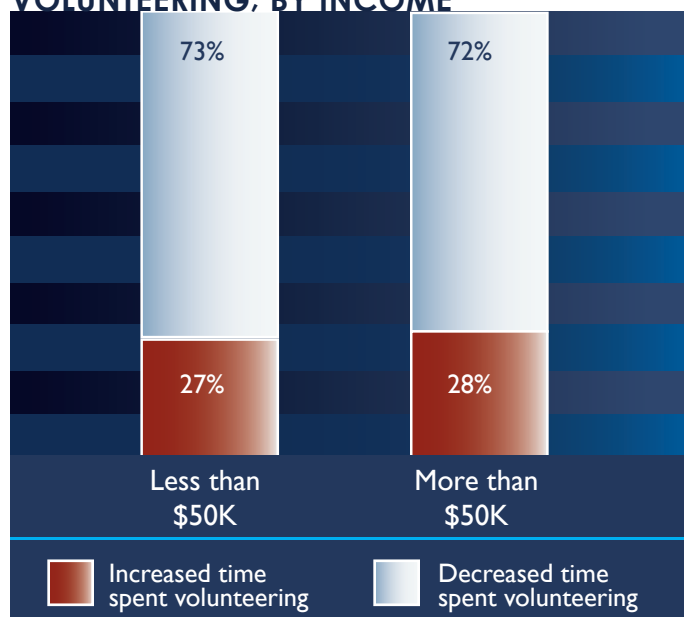
Viewing Californians by income, there is no statistical difference between the changes made by those making more or less than \$50,000 per year, with about 73% of both groups paring back on their public engagement.⁷

Examining the state by educational attainment again reveals no significant variation between those who attended college and those who have not.⁸

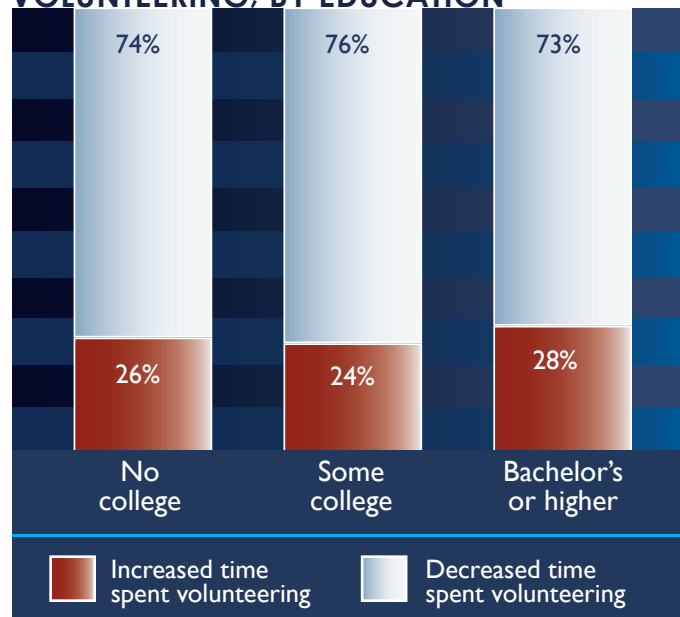
This appears to be true across every age group, as well, with just over 70% of Millennials, Baby Boomers, and seniors saying they have become less engaged.⁹

The pullback was also fairly consistent across ethnic groups, though at slightly different rates. While roughly two in three whites and African Americans cut back on volunteering, more than 80% of the state's Hispanics did.¹⁰ This high number is likely due to a combination of reduced volunteering opportunities and disproportionately high job losses in Latino communities.

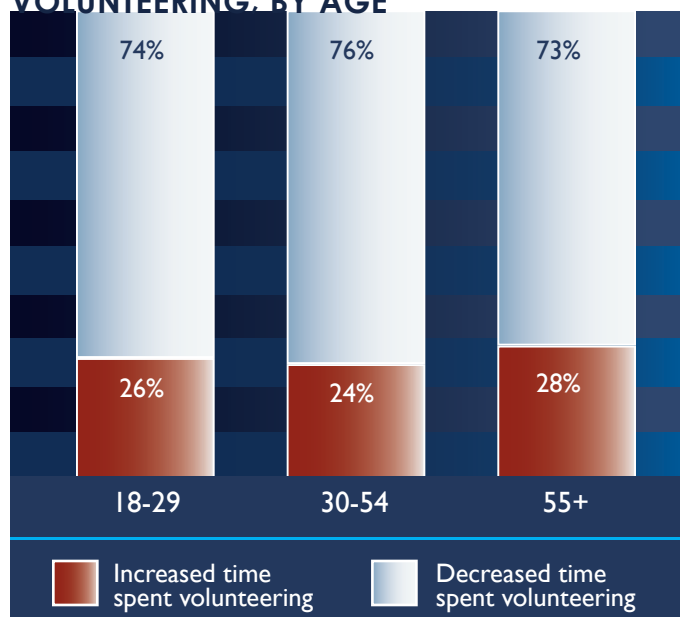
CHANGES IN VOLUNTEERING, BY INCOME



CHANGE IN VOLUNTEERING, BY EDUCATION



CHANGE IN VOLUNTEERING, BY AGE



No Matter How You Slice It: Budget Cuts, Stimulus, and Civic Engagement

For civic groups in California, the last year and a half has brought with it not just fears of drastic budget cuts—but just-as-real hopes for deliverance in the form of federal stimulus. Because of the timing of this survey, though, which relies on polling conducted in April of this year, many respondents were still waiting to hear more about both budget cuts and stimulus funds. While the state of California has cut billions of dollars from its education budget since the poll was conducted, for example, only 40% of the survey's respondents said schools in their neighborhoods had made cuts, 8% said their schools had remained the same, and 51% were not sure.¹¹ For many schools, those cuts weren't fully realized until the start of the current school year.

Federal stimulus funds, which only began to pour into the state over the summer, did not register in the survey, either. Only 3% of those surveyed said the civic groups they work with had received federal aid, while 72% stated that their organization had not yet received any federal dollars.¹²

It may be necessary to wait for next year's survey before it will be possible to gauge the full impact of both budget cuts and stimulus on civic groups like schools and community nonprofits.

After the Election: Historic Turnout, But No “Civic Awakening”

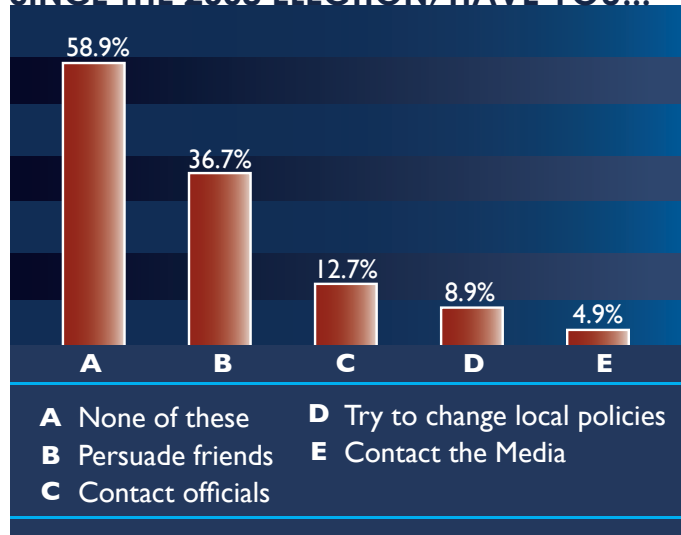
Last fall's election was the most dramatic exception to Californians' civic engagement decline. From the presidential race to statewide ballot initiatives, more Americans involved themselves in politics than ever before. Many pundits began to wonder whether the experience would trigger a new age of public participation across the country. During the primaries, *Newsweek* columnist, Anna Quindlen, opined, “The turnout tells the tale—American apathy of seasons past has given way to civic engagement.”¹³ Sociologist Robert Putnam posited that the increase in the youth participation and voting during the presidential campaign “evinced the sharpest increase in civic engagement in at least a half-century, portending a remarkable revitalization of American democracy.”¹⁴

Like many states, California also experienced a dramatic surge in voter participation. With a record number of voters heading to the polls (13.7 million), the 79.4% turnout among registered voters was the second highest proportion in state history—second only to the 1964 presidential race between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater.¹⁵

Still, surveys in early 2009 reveal that the November elections did not have the long-term civic “coattails” many had hoped. As in many states, there was a significant drop-off in civic engagement after the election in California. This occurred across a variety of political activities, from contacting elected officials to discussing issues with friends. At the time this survey was conducted, most Californians (58.9%), like Americans in general (64%), had yet

to participate politically again in any substantive way. The most popular action taken—both nationally and in California—was trying to persuade friends. But relatively few respondents said they were still trying to change local policies or contact local officials.

SINCE THE 2008 ELECTION, HAVE YOU...



While this dramatic pullback back in volunteering and public engagement can—at least in part—be attributed to the dramatic downturn in the economy, this survey also reveals the extent to which Californians have persevered under some of the worst economic conditions anywhere in the country. The fact that California's “civic health” mirrors, and occasionally surpasses, national engagement numbers demonstrates how much the state's residents have responded to historically challenging times.

WHO IS VOLUNTEERING & ENGAGING IN CALIFORNIA?

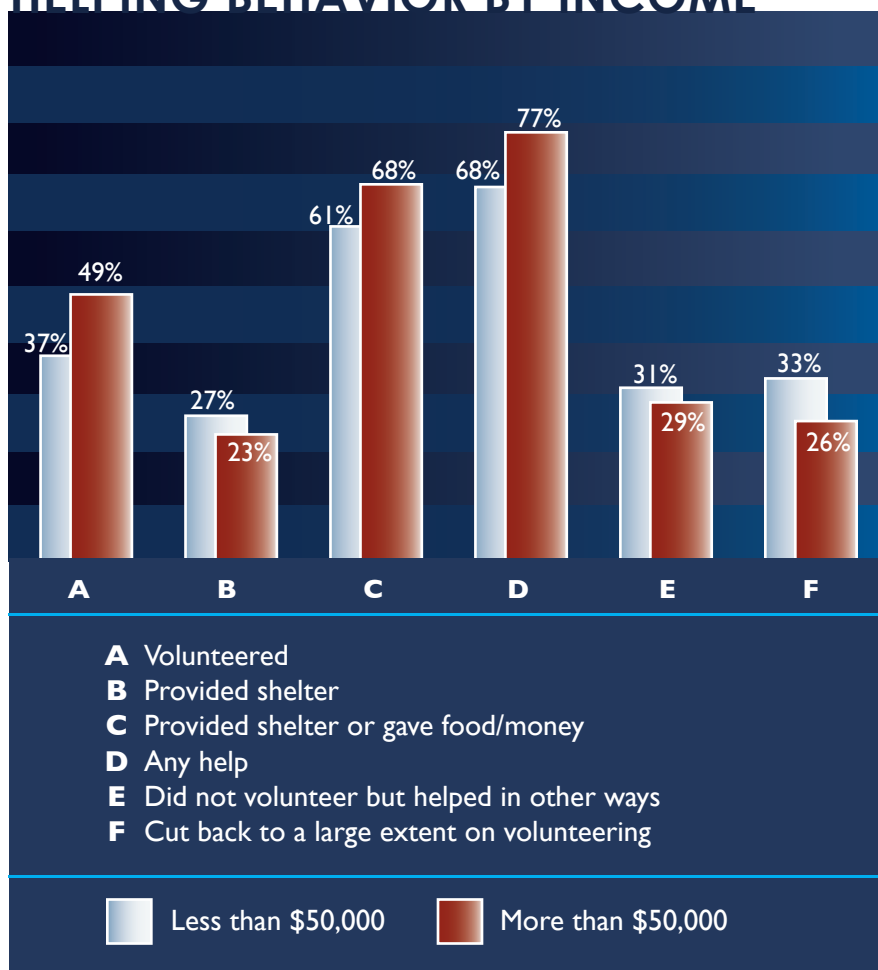
While nearly three in four Californians say they have cut back in the past year on the time they spend volunteering, participating in groups, or doing other civic activities, this pullback is not necessarily reflective of the state's overall engagement. There is more to volunteering, after all, than simply donating time or money.

A surprisingly large number of respondents who said they had not “volunteered” also acknowledged providing food and shelter to a friend or relative who was in need. Baby Boomers, in particular, a group that typically makes up a large percentage of community volunteers, have found themselves pulled in several different directions this year. With the economy in freefall, they have been forced to decrease their volunteer time to return to the workforce, help adult children and their families (financially or otherwise), as well as support their own parents.

In spite of these pressures, more than 40% of Californians gave food or money to a relative in the last year and over half gave food or money to someone who is not a relative. Some 14% of those surveyed, meanwhile, allowed someone who is not a relative to live in their home or property, while another 17% allowed a relative to live with them.¹⁶

This sort of helping behavior seems to be disproportionately true of low-income Californians, who have been among the hardest hit by the recession. Only 37% of those with household incomes of less than \$50,000 a year said they had volunteered, compared to nearly half of those in households that earn over \$50,000. But this apparent engagement gap is not quite as clear-cut as it may seem. Low-income Californians were far more likely to serve in more personal ways—opening up their homes to relatives or feeding neighbors—as opposed to more formal forms of engagement. More than one in four said they had provided shelter to another person in the last year, and 61% provided food, shelter or money.¹⁷

HELPING BEHAVIOR BY INCOME



Immigrants: A New Wave of Participants?

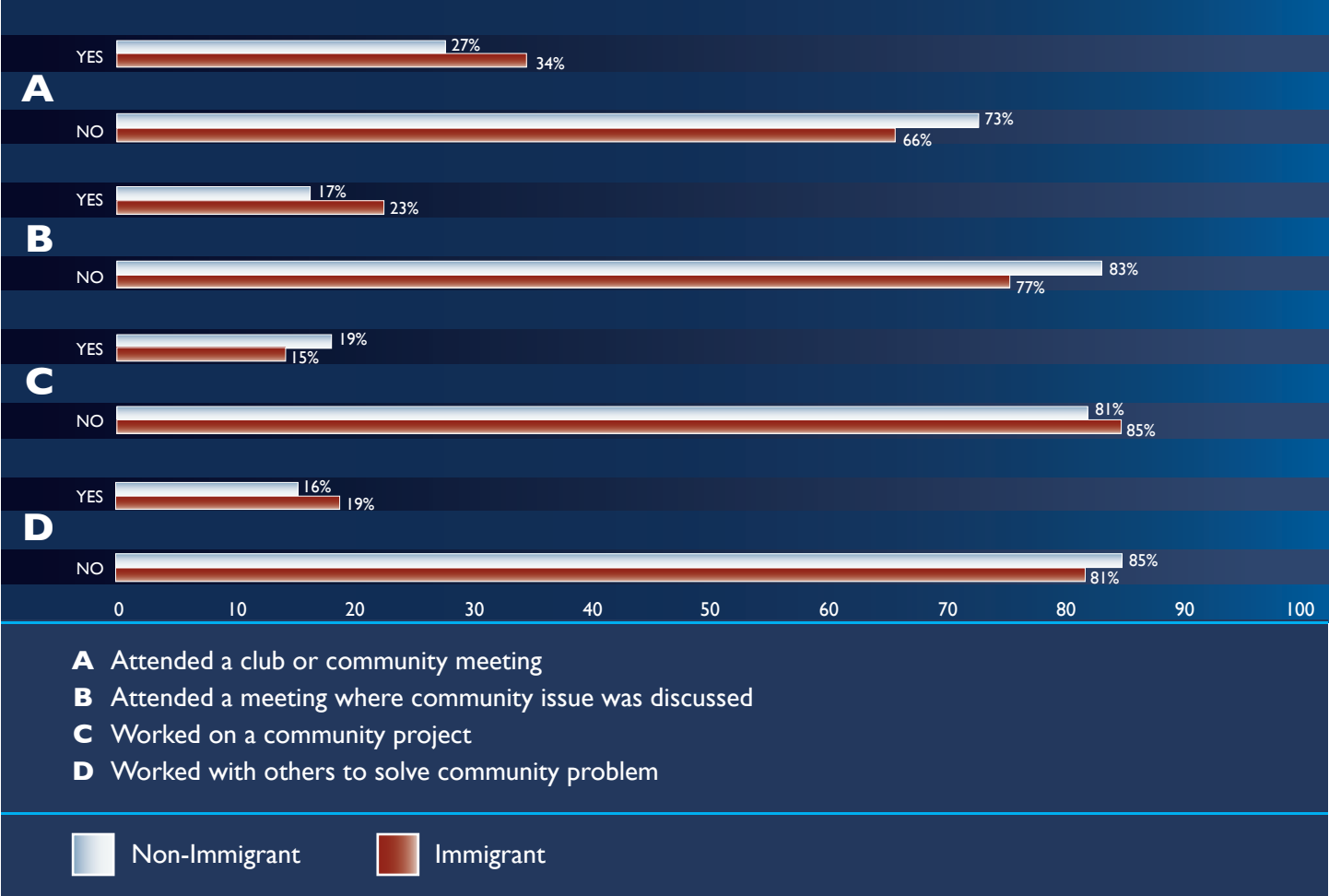
California's massive population of new immigrants has also added another wrinkle to the state's overall engagement trends. While recent immigrants have historically been less engaged in civic life than native-born citizens, in immigrant-rich California, where more than a quarter of the state's 36 million people were born outside the country (compared to just over 11% nationally), this seems to be changing.

To be sure, immigrants were slightly less likely to serve as volunteers than non-immigrants, with only 39% saying they had volunteered compared to 45% of non-immigrants. But they were also much more likely to be involved in their communities in other ways. More than one in three immigrants said they had attended a club or community meeting in their neighborhood, compared to 27% of non-immigrants. Nearly one in four immigrants said they had attended a meeting where a

community issue had been discussed, compared to only 17% of non-immigrants. Overall, immigrants were more likely than non-immigrants to say they had worked with others on pressing issues in their community: 19% said they had gotten involved to solve a community problem, compared to 16% of non-immigrants.¹⁸

While they were also surprisingly engaged in the state's civic life, immigrants were also slightly more likely to provide shelter to relatives than non-immigrants: 18% said they had provided shelter to a family member, compared to 16% of non-immigrants. Immigrants were also more likely than non-immigrants to give money to a relative, with 44% of respondents saying they had done so in the past year. Interestingly, they were less likely than non-immigrants to give to someone who is not a relative.¹⁹

ENGAGEMENT, BY IMMIGRANT STATUS

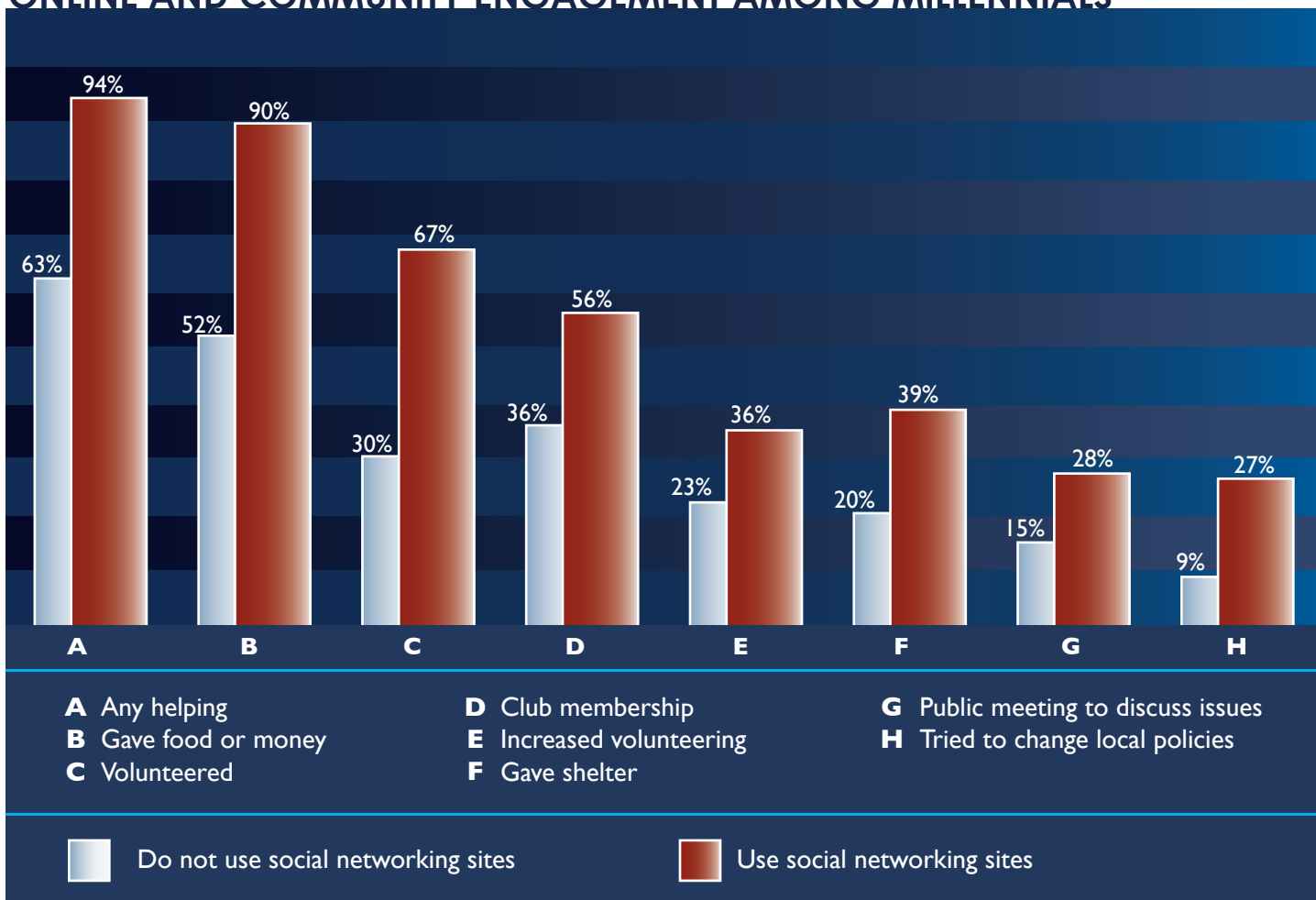


Here to Stay: Groups That Are Most Likely to Remain Engaged

While the current economic situation has affected all levels of volunteering in the state, the promise of increased immigrant engagement is far from the only silver lining. A look at different groups that increased their engagement this year reveals an array of potential growth areas. Higher education, in particular, continues to be a major driver of civic participation in the state. Those with at least some college experience are more likely to be engaged than those with no college experience—and, even in a down year, nearly one in three college grads said they had increased their engagement. Frequent attendees of organized religious services also continue to be among the state's most altruistic, with 31% saying they had increased their volunteering.²⁰

Technology is also continuing to reshape engagement in all of its forms—and to serve as a source of optimism for the years to come. While huge numbers of older respondents were disengaging this year, young people who used online social networks were significantly more likely to be engaged. Two in three Millennials who used online social networking sites said they had volunteered, and 36% said they had increased their volunteering in the last year.²¹ As usage of social networking sites continues to climb, this seems to be a sign that volunteering and civic engagement in a new, digital age may have even more room to grow.

ONLINE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AMONG MILLENNIALS



WHAT IS HAPPENING TO CIVIC TRUST?

With difficult economic times complicating Californians' efforts to stay engaged with the state's civic life, confidence in government and non-government institutions alike has begun to show signs of the strain. Scientific groups and small businesses remain at the top of the "most trusted" institutions in the state, along with organized religion and public schools.

But fewer than one in twenty Californians say they have "a great deal of confidence" in financial institutions and major companies after the economic tremors that have shaken the state. Federal agencies and Congress aren't viewed much more favorably.²²

There are some indications that Californians are holding on firmly to their sense of self—with many saying they feel the same attachment to the state that they do with people in their own neighborhood. Just under 40% of respondents say they have a moderate or very strong personal connection to the people on their block. Roughly the same number said they feel the same way about people in the state as a whole, as well.²³

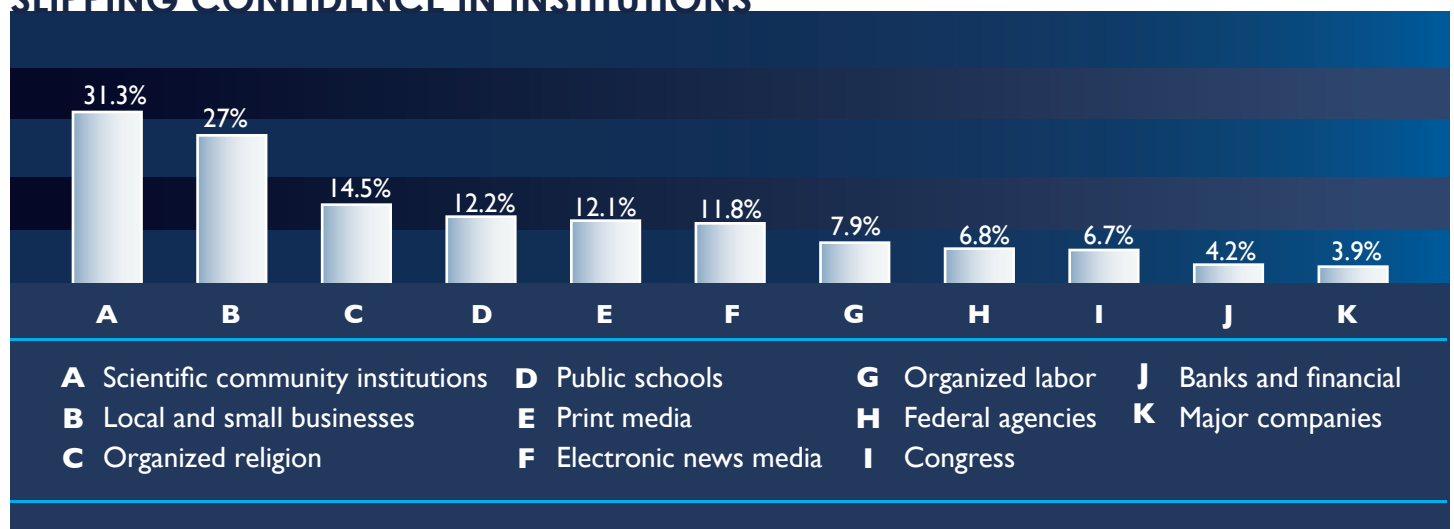
Still, the tumultuous last year has brought government at all levels under scrutiny. Only 13% of Californians say they have "a great deal of confidence" in the federal government to spend

the billions of dollars of stimulus money wisely. Less than 10%, meanwhile, trust either the state or their local government to do the same.²⁴

Government at All Levels—Federal, State, and Local—Vies for Confidence

This dwindling confidence in civic institutions is not consistent across every group in the state, however. Instead, it appears to vary dramatically according to race, income—and even proximity to the institution. The national study, for example, finds that African Americans across the country are much more likely to have some level of trust in the federal government (40%) than whites (22%). And yet that institutional trust largely evaporates at the local level, where only 15% of African Americans say they have a great deal of confidence in small business, compared to 36% of whites.²⁵

SLIPPING CONFIDENCE IN INSTITUTIONS



In California, where African Americans are a relatively small minority compared with Hispanics, the relationship between trust and proximity appears to be even more nuanced. Across the state, 32% of all respondents said they had confidence in local government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time,” compared to only 29% who felt the same way about the federal government. Those views were different among different ethnic groups, however. While 48% of African Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right, only 22% of whites say the same. Hispanics fall between the two groups, with 35% saying they trust the federal government most or all of the time.²⁶

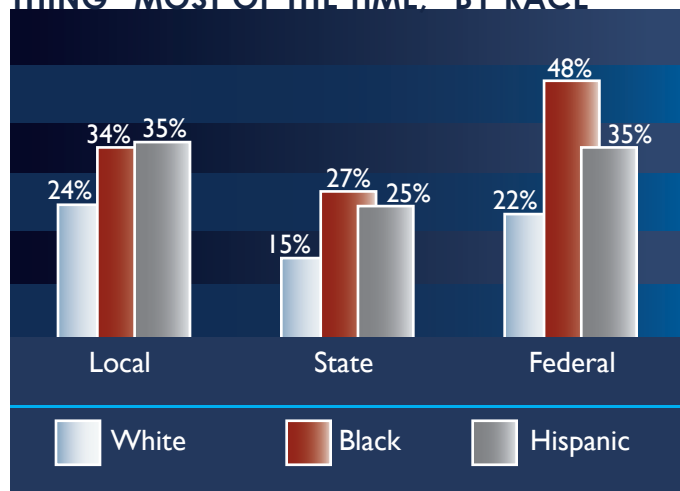
Given the political gridlock that has dominated Sacramento for the last several years, it is not surprising that confidence is dwindling in state government regardless of race. Only 22% of respondents overall say they had a great deal of confidence in the state government. More than one in ten whites say they “never” trust the state government to do what is right, while 15% of African Americans and 16% of Hispanics agree.²⁷

Local government, meanwhile, seems to earn substantially more trust from minorities in California than it does at the national level. Only 24% of whites say they trust local government to do the right thing most of the time or just about always. Nearly 35% of African Americans and Hispanics have the same confidence in local officials.²⁸

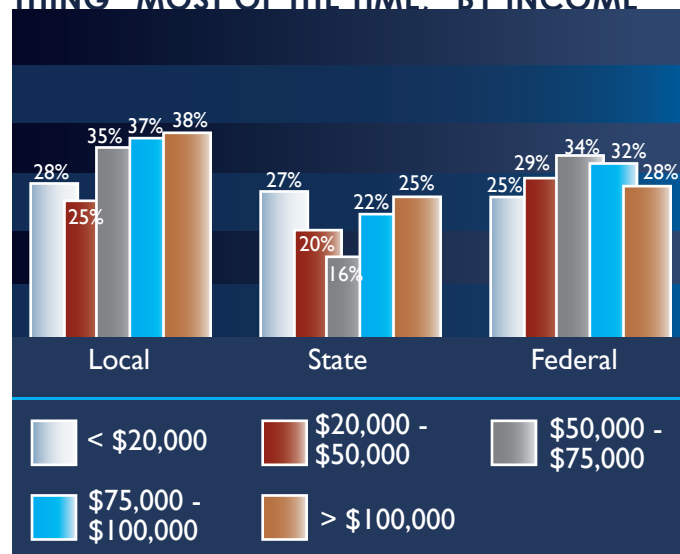
Like race, household income also seems to have a dramatic impact on confidence in government. While the level of trust in the federal government is relatively similar regardless of income, confidence in local government varies more widely. More than 10% of those making less than \$20,000 annually say local government should “never” be trusted to do the right thing, with just over one in four saying local government does the right thing “most of the time” or “just about always.”

Those in the highest income brackets—who presumably have more access to government officials—are not nearly so skeptical. Of those who earn more than \$100,000 annually, 7% say local government can “never” be trusted to do the right thing, while 34% say local officials do get it right most of the time.²⁹

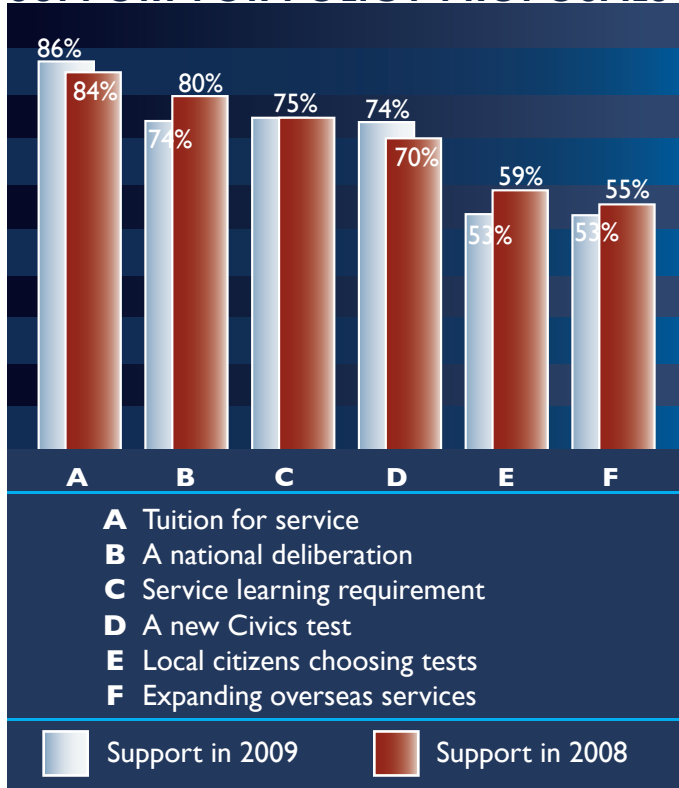
TRUST IN GOVERNMENT TO DO THE RIGHT THING “MOST OF THE TIME.” BY RACE



TRUST IN GOVERNMENT TO DO THE RIGHT THING “MOST OF THE TIME.” BY INCOME



SUPPORT FOR POLICY PROPOSALS



Like last year and similar to the national survey, the idea of the government paying tuition for public service registered as the top response. Related to this, and matching last year's California survey exactly (at 75%), the second most popular policy proposal was extending service-learning requirements in high schools.

An interesting departure from both the 2008 polling and this year's national survey, Californians increased their support of a "new civics test" to 74%. This is a 4% increase over last year in California, and nearly 10% higher than the US response. Of the six policy options, the civics test was one of only two that received greater support than in 2008.

Similar to the national study in relative placement, Californians rate "expanding overseas service" as the lowest of the possible policy solutions. Importantly, though, Californians' backing (53%) is more than 10% higher than the national response, demonstrating the state's continued international focus, likely due to its global economic commitments and diverse population.

This same ethnic diversity and international outlook may have made California particularly vulnerable to a global recession over the last year—and may present unique challenges when it comes to civic engagement. Yet many Californians still believe that these distinct features of the state will continue to serve as sources of great strength, as well as civic potential, in the years to come.

CONCLUSION

What works? Strategies for Renewing Civic Engagement

Like many other states, in the midst of the last year's historic recession, California has seen broad declines in civic engagement across almost every demographic group. Though voter turnout has remained high and there are glimmers of optimism in the rising participation of immigrants and the relatively robust confidence in local government among minorities, the challenges facing the state are many.

In the survey, Californians did present a few potential solutions, offering their opinions on what policy responses might help draw more into volunteering and public participation—what they think works, in other words, and what doesn't. Comparing these results to last year's, and to the national numbers, reveals some interesting parallels and differences.

CIVIC HEALTH INDEX SURVEY DATA AND SAMPLE

The Civic Health Index data discussed in this report are from a nationally representative survey of Americans that was conducted in April 2009 for the National Conference on Citizenship, based in Washington D.C. The sample is comprised of 1,518 nationally representative respondents and additional samples from 6 states - California, Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Ohio - providing a total national sample of 3,889 respondents. A total of 476 California respondents completed the survey.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Sweeney, James. "Governor: Fiscal Armageddon Near." San Diego Union-Tribune. 8/11/08
- ² Putnam, Robert. "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st Century." Scandinavian Political Studies. Vol. 2, No. 30, 2007.
- ³ "2008 Voter Turnout Sets California Record." CBS5 News, 12/13/08.
- ⁴ California Civic Health survey data
- ⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/lau/home.htm>
- ⁶ Thompson, Don. "California unemployment rate jumps to 10.1 percent." San Francisco Chronicle. 2/27/09.
- ⁷ California Civic Health survey analysis provided by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, Tufts University
- ⁸ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ⁹ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ¹¹ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ¹² CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ¹³ Quindlen, Anna. "The End of Apathy". Newsweek, 1/21/08, Vol. 151, Issue 3.
- ¹⁴ Putnam, Roger. "The rebirth of American civic life." The Boston Globe. 3/2/08.
- ¹⁵ "2008 Voter Turnout Sets California Record." CBS5 News, 12/13/08.
- ¹⁶ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ¹⁹ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ²⁰ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ²¹ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ²² CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ²³ California Civic Health survey data
- ²⁴ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*
- ²⁵ California Civic Health survey data
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- ²⁷ California Civic Health survey data
- ²⁸ California Civic Health survey data
- ²⁹ California Civic Health survey data
- ³⁰ CIRCLE data, *ibid.*

CIVIC INDICATORS WORKING GROUP

JOHN BRIDGELAND, CEO, Civic Enterprises; Chairman, Board of Advisors, National Conference on Citizenship; and former Assistant to the President of the United States & Director, Domestic Policy Council & USA Freedom Corps

NELDA BROWN, Executive Director, National Service-Learning Partnership at the Academy for Educational Development

KRISTEN CAMBELL, Program Director, National Conference on Citizenship

MAYA ENISTA, CEO, Mobilize.org

WILLIAM GALSTON, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; former Deputy Assistant to the President of the United States for Domestic Policy

STEPHEN GOLDSMITH, Daniel Paul Professor of Government, Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University; Director, Innovations in American Government; Chairman, Corporation for National & Community Service; and former Mayor of Indianapolis

ROBERT GRIMM, JR., Director of Research and Policy Development, Corporation for National and Community Service

LLOYD JOHNSTON, Research Professor and Distinguished Research Scientist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research; and Principal Investigator of the Monitoring the Future Study

KEI KAWASHIMA-GINSBERG, Lead Researcher, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University

PETER LEVINE, Director, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University

MARK HUGO LOPEZ, Associate Director of the Pew Hispanic Center; Research Professor, University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs

SEAN PARKER, Co-Founder and Chairman of Causes on Facebook/MySpace; Founding President of Facebook

ROBERT PUTNAM, Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University; Founder, Saguro Seminar; author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*

THOMAS SANDER, Executive Director, the Saguro Seminar, Harvard University

DAVID B. SMITH, Executive Director, National Conference on Citizenship; Founder and Chairman, Mobilize.org

HEATHER SMITH, Executive Director, Rock the Vote

MAX STIER, Executive Director, Partnership for Public Service

MICHAEL WEISER, Chairman, National Conference on Citizenship

JONATHAN ZAFF, Vice President for Research, America's Promise Alliance

STATE PARTNERS

CALIFORNIA: **ZABRAE VALENTINE**, California Forward and **PETE PETERSON**, Common Sense California.

FLORIDA: **DOUGLAS DOBSON**, Florida Joint Center for Citizenship, Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government at University of Central Florida, and Bob Graham Center for Public Service at the University of Florida

ILLINOIS: **SHAWN HEALY**, McCormick Freedom Museum and **BARBARA FERRARA**, University of Illinois-Springfield

MINNESOTA: **HARRY BOYTE** and **NAN SKELTON**, Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Augsburg College

NEW HAMPSHIRE: **MICHELE DILLON** and **MICA STARK**, Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire

OHIO: **KATHLEEN KNIGHT ABOWITZ**, **CLYDE BROWN**, and **ANNIE MILLER**, Miami University, Hamilton

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William Galston
Stephen Goldsmith
Scott Heiferman
Walter Isaacson
Amy Kass
Gail Leftwich Kitch
Michelle Nunn
Michael Pack
Robert Putnam
Charles Quigley
Ian Rowe
Tobi Walker

Founded in 1946 and chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1953, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is a leader in promoting our nation's civic life. We track, measure and promote civic participation and engagement in partnership with other organizations on a bipartisan, collaborative basis. We focus on ways to enhance history and civics education, encourage national and community service, and promote greater participation in the political process.

Many distinguished Americans have been involved with the growth and development of the NCoC over the years including Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower and Chief Justices Earl Warren and Warren Burger. The roster of board members, advisors and guest speakers at NCoC events represent a diverse spectrum of leaders from across government, industry, academia, community and nonprofit organizations and the media; people like Senators Robert Byrd and Lamar Alexander; Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Stephen Breyer; philanthropists Ray Chambers and Eugene Lang, authors David McCullough and Walter Isaacson, scholars Robert Putnam and Stephen Goldsmith, MTV's Ian Rowe, ABC's Cokie Roberts, AOL's Jean Case, Facebook's Sean Parker, former Clinton Administration advisor William Galston and former Bush Administration advisor John Bridgeland.

The NCoC's accomplishments are many, ranging from fueling the civic energy of the Greatest Generation freshly home from WWII to leading the celebration of our nation's Bicentennial in 1976. The NCoC helped establish the observance of Citizenship Day, every September 17, the week in which we were chartered to hold our annual conference focusing on building an active and engaged citizenry. Since 2006, the NCoC has produced *America's Civic Health Index*, the nation's leading measure of citizen actions and attitudes. In April 2009, the Civic Health Index was included in the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act and named NCoC and the Corporation for National and Community Service to work with the U.S. Census Bureau to expand the reach and impact of the Civic Health Index in order to help communities harness the power of their citizens.

To advance our mission to better understand the broad dimensions of citizenship today and to encourage greater civic participation, the NCoC has developed and sustained a network of over 250 like-minded institutions that seek a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to strengthening our system of self-government.

For more information, please visit www.ncoc.net



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