



## Generation Citizen 2012 Elections Position Paper January 2012

The 2008 election was historic for many reasons: chief among them, a sense of possibility in troubling times, and the upsurge in the youth vote. But now, the 2012 presidential election may become notable for what is absent: the messages of optimism, and the young voters. Over the last four years, many Americans, especially the Millennials<sup>1</sup> who voted in record numbers during the 2008 election, have watched their elation turn to despair. In 2010, although young people represented approximately 25% of eligible voters, they comprised a mere 10% of the electorate. Mistaking our present state of affairs for a permanent norm, they have developed a deep and counterproductive cynicism about politics. That is partly because they were never properly prepared for political engagement in the first place; ultimately, in a democracy, outrage at the politicians we continue to elect demands closer scrutiny of the voters doing the electing.

Getting more Americans to be informed, engaged citizens demands an investment in the infrastructure of politics: schools. **In order to improve our political process, schools need to get political.** They can do this by embracing political discussion in the classroom, ensuring that effective citizenship is taught before students reach college, and promoting service and volunteerism within the context of politics.

### **Schools: Get Political**

At first blush, this probably sounds like exactly the sort of thing Americans do *not* want schools to do. In the past several years, institutions from the media to even the neighborhoods we choose to live in have grown increasingly politically homogenous. Americans are increasingly likely to be surrounded by views they already agree with - and therefore less likely to fully understand, let alone grapple with, alternative views. Our democracy is predicated on the assumption that a diverse and free flow of ideas will, over the long run, assure the best and most just outcomes for society. But without institutions to facilitate and guide genuine and respectful interactions between those with differing views, mischaracterizations and shout fests become the norm. We therefore need *more* politics, because politics is the process of negotiating and resolving disagreements in a democratic society.

As it happens, we have just such an institution: public schools. Schools have a civic mission to prepare informed and engaged citizens capable of taking on the demands of democratic self-governance - and they are often the only place students will encounter and interact with those who differ with the values and views of their families and religious communities. Yet, the way that our schools operate indicates that we believe that civic knowledge and skills will somehow

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<sup>1</sup> "Millennials" refers to those born in the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.



materialize and be put to good use the moment students reach voting age. Just as schools teach math, science and reading, they must teach effective citizenship. And, as with other courses, civic knowledge and skills are best taught through action.

Unfortunately, schools have been doing just the opposite. Four reasons stand out. First, since demonstrating civics proficiency is not a graduation requirement in all but seven states, it often gets crowded out of the curriculum. Second, effective civics education strategies, like class discussions and quality service learning are far more likely in wealthier, majority-white schools than poorer, majority-minority ones - a key cause of our nation's large Civic Engagement Gap. Third, an excessive emphasis on political correctness combined with a fear of litigation and administrative retaliation have led teachers to steer clear of controversy. And finally, teachers themselves (notably social studies teachers) often lack the content and pedagogical knowledge to be able to educate democratic citizens.

Instead of educating *for* citizenship (i.e., how to actually engage), teachers usually educate *about* citizenship. As scholars like the RAND Corporation's Anna Rosefsky Saavedra have noted, 86% of teachers surveyed for the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exam said they used textbooks at least once a week, 53% used them daily, and 70% required students to fill in worksheets at least once a week. The results? Only 24% of 12th graders scored proficient on the NAEP - and a minuscule 4% scored advanced. Sanitizing school discourse of anything remotely political all but guarantees civics will maintain its dull reputation and that students will not know how to participate as adults. When the institution central to all communities fails to fulfill its role in communal political life, we all suffer.

Schools therefore need to get political, in the best sense of the term. They need to serve as a site of political debate and provide opportunities for students to learn democracy through action – what we call “action civics.” And they need to make sure their teachers understand and are motivated to fulfill their civic mission. This emphatically does *not* mean that schools should take sides. Rather, they should help hold the ring by teaching students *how* to respectfully exchange ideas and learn from one another. If schools teach students to become political the entire political process would benefit.

### **No Degree is Necessary for Citizenship**

College has become a rallying cry not just for educators working to close the academic achievement gap, but also for companies hungry for top-notch workers and governments seeking to improve economic competitiveness. In an era where our nation no longer has plentiful, well-paying manufacturing jobs, a college education has become the price for entry into the American middle class. K-12 schools are thus no longer the totality of a child's education, but merely a phase



in a process that stretches from early childhood education to college and graduate school.

Schools are right to emphasize the need for and benefits of tertiary education. But too often they have allowed the assumption of college matriculation to let primary and secondary educators off the hook. In college, students should learn how to engage with others' ideas, gain an appreciation and respect for diverse views, and become more politically involved. Yet all of these skills find their prerequisites in K-12 schools.

The assumption that all students will attend college is at this point more aspirational than descriptive. Many students will not attend a four-year college or any college at all. And many of those who do will not necessarily choose courses that enhance civic participation. As K-12 schools have retreated from their civic mission, a worrying trend has begun to take hold. In the 2008 election, according to Tufts University's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 18-29 year olds voted at a 62% rate, which was 26 percentage points higher than the turnout rate for non-college youth. This is a stark difference. Although we should aim to ensure every young person attends college, we should also ensure that every young person participates in the political process, regardless of whether they attend college.

College must not be treated as a de facto prerequisite for citizenship. It is not just the responsibility of higher education to prepare its students for citizenship - all K-12 schools must join the cause and teach their students how to be civically engaged.

### **Service Learning and the Millennials**

One of the few bright spots for youth civic engagement over the past couple decades has been community service. This trend has been partly driven by the "service learning" movement, which extols the benefits of conducting community service in an educational context. Though only 20% of fourth and eighth graders currently participate, when taught well, service learning is highly effective and can lead to precisely the type of civic engagement our country needs.

Unfortunately, schools' aversion to all things political means it often is not. Too often schools have students perform community service tasks that are divorced from the broader context in which they occur. For example, students will volunteer at a soup kitchen without utilizing the opportunity to analyze the causes of hunger or poverty or to reflect on the effectiveness of soup kitchens themselves. Understanding the root causes of social and economic issues is key to effective politics and civic engagement.

By encouraging community service divorced from community politics, schools send the implicit message that there can be a dichotomy between them. That dichotomy is false: our democratic system is predicated on politicizing them in



order to solve them. The very process of debating and deciding upon issues as a polity improves and validates a course of action. Failing to teach young people about this process all but guarantees they won't engage in it as adults - and solving pressing community problems will become that much more difficult. It also tacitly promotes political disengagement, a danger in a democratic system whose effectiveness and validity is partly dependent upon belief in the system itself. Service learning can therefore be effective only to the extent that it engages with the context and root causes of community problems. In other words, service learning will be effective to the extent that it actively embraces politics.

Reshaping the electorate represents a return to first principles, and it won't be accomplished within the next eleven months. Yet rethinking how we educate citizens and investing in the future of politics must begin now. For young voters especially, the frustrations of our present politics should not be a repellant, but a spur to more informed, engaged action. It is only through politics - the process of negotiating and resolving disagreements in a democratic society - that our country can overcome the daunting array of challenges we currently face.