

A large graphic on the left side of the page, partially cut off by the edge. It features a dark blue background with a white star in the upper left and red and white horizontal stripes below it. The graphic is composed of several curved segments.

# **The Political Participation of Working Youth and College Students**

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### Abstract

Unprecedented attention has gone to researching young voters, and yet one segment of this age group has been largely ignored: non-college (or “working”) youth. Because very little is known about them, the following paper advances three fundamental concerns: What types of political activities do young workers engage in? What can be learned about them by comparing their political attitudes and behaviors to their college attending peers? and, What are some strategies that might be effective to increase their political participation? In responding to these questions, the current article reports data from a telephone survey of over 1,000 19-23 year-old working and college youth. The findings confirm that young workers (1) report lower levels of political socialization and interest as well as fewer civic skills, group memberships and mobilization opportunities than college students, and (2) are less likely to engage in a set of political acts than their college attending peers. The data also reveal, however, heretofore unknown patterns for this group, including that: political socialization and political interest are the most powerful predictors of participation for young workers; the cultivation of civic skills is a stronger predictor of participation for young workers than for college students; and workers who belong to groups and express an interest in politics may be the most ripe for mobilization efforts. The conclusion addresses how these findings could be used in efforts to engage young workers in the political system.

Since 18 year olds were first given the chance to vote in the 1972 elections, their turnout rates have declined considerably (save two departures to this trend in 1992 and 2004, see Levine & Lopez, 2002; "Youth Voter"). Concerned with the potential impact this pattern might have on the political system, non-profit organizations, funding agencies and academics have begun to allocate considerable resources to researching the civic participation of America's youth. Two key findings to emerge from these studies have been that education and maturation are critical predictors of voting behavior for young people (Highton & Wolfinger, 2001; Lopez & Kolaczowski, 2003; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Teixeira & Rogers, 2000; Wattenberg, 2002; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). That is, being part of a college community and gaining life experiences as one grows both have been shown to increase the likelihood that younger Americans will vote.

While these works have yielded important data in understanding the practical question of "who votes" (indeed, the connection between "education and voting" is often regarded the sturdiest relationship in predicting political behavior), they have left important explanatory and practical questions largely unexamined. Such questions include: What explains the political activities and sensibilities of young Americans who do not attend college? and How might these young people be mobilized? Although many scholars might have reservations about studying non-college youth--believing that these young people do not have the standard SES requirements to engage in the polity (see Leighley, 1995), or that some of them, at least, will vote "in time" (see Abramson, Aldrich & Rohde, 1998)--we are concerned that if turnout levels for younger citizens continue to plummet, this specific subset of the population may become progressively more separated from electoral politics. The current project, then, attempts to add to what is known about the understudied population of non-college (or "working") youth and is driven by a set of truly basic concerns: What types of political activities

do young workers engage in? What can be learned about them by comparing their political attitudes and behaviors to their college attending peers? and, What are some strategies that might be effective to increase their political participation?

#### Working Youth and College Students

Even though they are rarely the source of political inquiry, there are more non-college youth than college students in the United States. Data show that roughly one-fourth of Americans do not enroll in formal schooling after obtaining a high school diploma, and--although four-year college graduation rates have been increasing over time--nearly three-fourths of Americans will not earn a college degree (Mastracci, 2003, Stoops, 2004). According to estimates, in 2000 there were roughly 15.4 million 18-25 Americans who had no college experience, a figure that accounts for roughly 55% of the 18-25 year old cohort (Lopez & Kolaczowski, 2003). For a host of reasons including "age, lack of tuition money, inadequate secondary schooling, reluctance to study, [and] discouragement from family and friends," college may not be a reality for a sizable portion of the citizenry (Uchitelle, 2000, D1). Thus, even though "politicians and policy makers speak mainly of sending more people to college, a steady third of adults 25 and older have only finished high school" (Uchitelle, 2000, D1).

Relatively little is known about the politics of these citizens. Perhaps the most comprehensive work to date is a fact sheet that provides a look at the attitudes, behaviors and values of non-college youth. This report shows that non-students are less likely to vote, to be registered to vote, to volunteer, or to feel they can make a difference in their communities than their college attending counterparts (Lopez & Kolaczowski, 2003, p. 1). As valuable a sketch of non-college youth as this fact sheet provides, it is necessarily constrained by secondary data analysis (examining the Current Population Survey and the CIRCLE/Council for Excellence in Government Youth Survey). Consequently, it does not report multivariate relationships (estimating how certain variables influence participation) nor does it address relationships across variables

(detailing how certain attitudes work together to influence specific behaviors). Just a handful of other studies have conducted multivariate analyses on the participation of working youth (although it is important to note that these works lack the breadth of the aforementioned fact sheet). In one analysis of the participation of college and non-college white youth, Bennett (1991) observes that voting is best explained by (1) being mobilized through a network of community contacts for young workers, (2) belonging to an established network of contacts for college youth, and (3) having connections and being invited to participate for both groups. In their work on participation, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), find that turnout among groups of lower educated Americans makes larger gains over the adult life span than for those with college degrees. In interpreting this pattern, these authors contend, "life experience is a substitute for school. Many uneducated people, who have the fewest politically relevant skills when they become eligible to vote, become more accomplished in coping with bureaucratic hurdles and thinking about political material" (p. 60). To sum, then, the few projects examining this group suggest that young workers have fewer political resources than college youth. Nevertheless, a set of variables (including community contacts, being asked to vote and maturation) seem to increase the likelihood that they will participate in politics.

Considerably more is known about the political behaviors of "American youth" (a composite of college and non-college attendees). Because the current goal is to learn more about the political sensibilities of working youth, it makes sense to start by considering a set of constructs that have been shown to increase the likelihood that all youth will participate in politics. These predictors include:

- 1) political resources--such as the aforementioned variable of education (Banks & Roker, 1994; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995) or the possession and practice of civic skills such as having written a formal letter, made decisions in a meeting, planned or

- chaired a meeting, or given a speech (Kirlin, 2003; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995);
- 2) psychological predispositions--including the motivation to appreciate democratic governance, whether it is inspired through political socialization (Hyman, 1959; Owen, 2000) or political interest (Mann, 1999; Lopez & Kolaczowski, 2003; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995);
- 3) social connectedness--including connectedness and personal relationships (Nie, Junn & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; McLeod, et al., 1994; Mutz, Mondak & Huckfeldt, 1994; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Timpone, 1998), and organizational memberships (Hanks, 1981; Comber, 2003; Nie, Junn & Stehlik-Barry, 1996); and
- 4) political opportunities--such as being asked to vote through face to face contact or other mobilization efforts (Gerber & Green, 2000; Green & Gerber, 2001; Leighley, 1995).

As detailed in the Lopez and Kolaczowski (2003) report, as well as the Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) research, it is generally believed that college students have an edge on all four of these constructs related to working youth. Yet because most projects have focused on the scientific goal of prediction (locating the variables that increase voting behavior) rather than the normative goal of mobilization (discovering variables that may increase the likelihood that young workers will vote), few projects have examined how these concepts interact for young workers. Thus, in this study we cast a wide net to add to what is known about this group. Accordingly, we opt first to describe their political attitudes and behaviors, then to compare them to college students on the aforementioned predictors of political participation, and finally, based on these relationships, to search for strategies that can be employed to mobilize them.

## **METHOD**

The current report stems from the Work, Education and Political Activity of Youth Project (WEPAY), an undertaking completed at The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation at the University of Texas at Austin, supported by a

grant from CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

In this paper, we report on data from a telephone survey of over 1,000 young adults between the ages of 19 and 23. The survey was conducted by the Office of Survey Research at the University of Texas at Austin.<sup>1</sup> Calls were placed from November, 2003 through January, 2004 and were conducted in both English and Spanish. The survey contained 85 items that explored a set of concepts connected with political participation, political resources, psychological predispositions, social connectedness, political opportunities, schooling, work experiences and this age group.<sup>2</sup> The calls lasted an average of approximately 11 minutes.

Respondents were selected from recent registered voter lists in Des Moines, Iowa, Fresno, California, and El Paso, Texas.<sup>3</sup> These three locations were chosen because (1) they are comparable in size, but vary by region, mobility, education, and ethnicity; (2) they depart from trends of over-sampling urban youth; and (3) they make voting turnout data accessible to scholars (Paolino, Jarvis & Hart, 2003).<sup>4</sup> Hispanic youth were consciously proportionally over-represented.

In the current report, we chose to dichotomize the sample into two groups: college students and working youth. Although this decision does not fully explore the plurality of educational and work experiences in which youth currently engage (Cooksey & Rindfuss, 2001), we have opted to split the data in this way in the current project, exploring other means of describing young workers and students in other papers. This choice follows decisions in the academic literature dating back to the 1960s which use the college experience as a division in educational attainment. It also honors a few assumptions. First, these categories are clean and distinguish between youth who are on college campuses (who may be exposed to curricula that may increase civic skills as well as social networks which may increase political activities) and those who are at worksites (who are exposed to different types of opportunities which may increase civic skills as well as provide

different types of social connections, interpersonal relationships and mobilization opportunities which may affect political inclinations). Second, these categories sidestep the debate about the appropriate categorization of associate's and certificate students (see Cooksey & Rindfuss, 2001).<sup>5</sup>

Respondents were classified as "workers" or "college students" according to the following criteria:

- 1) young people who claimed that they were not currently attending school and had their highest level of education as something less than a bachelor's degree were coded as "working." The total number of "working" respondents was 229.
- 2) young people who were seeking a bachelor's degree as well as those who had completed bachelor's degrees and were at the time of the survey pursuing advanced degrees were coded as "college" respondents. The total number of "college" respondents was 454.

Respondents who were pursuing an associate's degree, a certificate, or a high school diploma at the time of the study were all dropped from this sample, as were respondents who had finished a bachelor's degree and were no longer in school. Research suggests that these latter individuals are temporarily lost to the political sphere as they transition from student status to adult roles (Highton & Wolfinger, 2001).

In the following pages, we present descriptive level statistics to illustrate the characteristics of working and college youth as well as the results of ordinary least squares regression to begin to compare the relative impacts of a set of variables on the likelihood that young workers and college students will engage in political activities.<sup>6</sup> While the earliest studies of political participation use voting as the sole measure of an individual's participation (Verba & Nie, 1972), more recent studies use an index of political participation measures and we do the same. Our index of political participation is derived from the Civic Volunteerism Model (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995) and recent work on the civic engagement of youth (Andolina, Keeter, Zukin & Jenkins, 2003).<sup>7</sup>

## FINDINGS

A first concern of this project is to examine the political activities of working youth. In doing so, it is helpful to examine a set of overall descriptive statistics from the WEPAY project. As illustrated in Table 1, the working youth we spoke to were 50% male and 50% female; 21.1 years old on average; and 53% Anglo and 47% Hispanic. They averaged 12.3 years of education, and reported the following political activities: 63% stated that they were likely

Table 1

to vote in elections; 29% claimed to have worked on a community problem; 19% suggested that they had contacted an elected official about a public issue; 19% offered that they had protested; and 7% informed us that they belonged to a group. On our index of political participation, these youth completed an average of 1.35 political activities in the last year (range 0-5; see Table 1).

*Working Youth and College Students--Demographic Data and Political Activities (in Percentages)*

| Students   | Working Youth<br>n=229 | College<br>n=454 |
|--|------------------------|------------------|
| Hispanic/Latino                                  | 47                     | 36               |
| White/Anglo                                      | 53                     | 64               |
| Male   | 50                     | 47               |
| Female   | 50                     | 53               |
| Age (year and month)                             | 21.1                   | 20.6             |
| Education (average total years)                  | 12.3                   | 14.3             |
| Average total number of Political Activities     | 1.35                   | 1.89             |
| Always or often vote                             | 63                     | 73               |
| Worked with someone to solve a community problem | 29                     | 47               |
| Have contacted a public official                 | 19                     | 28               |
| Have demonstrated or protested                   | 19                     | 24               |
| Belong to a political group                      | 7                      | 19               |

To better understand these data, it makes sense to compare these working youth to college students (whose demographic, educational and political information also appear in Table 1). As displayed there, college students were 47% male and 53 % female; 20.6 years old on average; and 64% Anglo and 36% Hispanic. They averaged 14.3 years of education, and reported the following political activities: 73% stated that they were likely to vote in elections; 47% claimed to have worked on a community problem; 28% suggested that they had contacted an elected official about a public issue; 24% offered that they had protested; and 19% informed us that they belonged to a group. On the participation index, students completed an average of 1.89 acts in the last year.

A detailed look at the political activities in Table 1 reveals that working youth engage less often than college students in each of the actions in the modified Civic Volunteerism Model index. Moreover, they average one-half of a political act less than their college attending peers.<sup>8</sup> Although these findings are distinct from those found in other data sets, particularly as they inquire into a broader array of political activities of working youth, they are generally consistent with the data from earlier reports (Lopez & Kolaczowski, 2003). That is, on all measures college students are more politically active than working youth.

To get a richer sense of the political motivations and activities of working youth, as well as how such patterns compare to college students, two models were run to assess the relative impacts of aforementioned factors which have received support in predicting turnout (including: political resources--educational attainment and civic skills; psychological predispositions--political socialization and interest; social connectedness--personal relationships and group memberships; political opportunities--mobilization attempts; and two variables shown to depress turnout--race and gender) on the dependent measure of political acts (as displayed in Table 1). Two models were run in order to compare the relative strength of individual variables on working youth and college students, something that could not be accomplished if the populations were estimated together (see Leighley

& Vedlitz, 1999). The results of the models appear in Table 2.

Table 2

*Working Youth and College Students--Political Participation*

| Students                 | Working Youth | College |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------|
|                          | n=229         | n=454   |
| Educational Attainment   | .072          | 0.43    |
| Hispanic/Latino          | -.104         | -.080*  |
| Female                   | -.087         | -.013   |
| Civic Skills             | .169**        | .018    |
| Mobilization Attempt     | .130*         | .148**  |
| Personal Relationships   | -.082         | .059    |
| Group Memberships        | .215**        | .284**  |
| Interest in Politics     | .220**        | .377**  |
| Political Socialization  | .226**        | .147**  |
| Model Intercept          | -1.017        | -1.281  |
| Model Adjusted R-Squared | 0.390         | 0.437   |

\* p. &lt; .05

\*\*p. &lt; .01

Working Youth. As illustrated in Table 2, the model for workers was robust, with an adjusted R-square statistic of .390. Several of the variables were positive and significant for the working youth, including: political socialization, political interest, group memberships, civic skills and personal mobilization. As Table 2 shows, four of these variables also lead to participation for

college students. Intriguingly, though, there are two findings in the working youth column that are unique to this group. First, it appears that for these young people, the development of specific skills (e.g., writing letters, making decisions in meetings, chairing meetings and giving speeches) seems to promote participation. Indeed, the data show that practicing civic skills has an influential effect



on participation, as each additional skill cultivated by a young worker appears to result in a small but significant increase in political participation. Second, the Latino working youth in this sample are just as likely to participate in politics as their white counterparts--a finding that does not emerge with the college students in this sample.

**College Students.** The college student model proved fairly robust, with an adjusted R-square statistic of .437. Here, several independent variables were significant and positive, including political interest, group memberships, personal mobilization and political socialization. The results show that the variable with the greatest potential to increase participation for college students is interest in politics (a modest but notable finding). The data reveal that if political interest grew by one increment for college students, it would result in an additional one-third of a political act. Latino college students participated less than their white counterparts, although this deficit, too, is fairly small (Latinos engaged in .08 fewer political acts than Anglos). Finally, educational attainment, gender, civic skills, and personal relationships were all statistically insignificant, a finding that is similar to that in the worker model (where all of these variables except civic skills were also insignificant).

Overall, these two models demonstrate that the paths to political participation are largely similar for working and college youth. Nevertheless, these models also reflect how the relative importance of the predictors may be related to the political resources, opportunities, and awareness of the two groups. As the data in Table 2 show, political socialization and civic skills are more important influences for working youth than for their college attending peers.

Another key concern of this project is to identify predictors of participation for working youth in order to locate tactics to engage this group. To do this, we focused specifically on the working youth in the sample and asked: What characteristics describe those who are more politically active than others? And, of those characteristics, which ones might present intervention opportunities for possible mobilization?

As displayed in Table 2, political sophistication, organizational memberships and political interest are the three strongest predictors of activity. Of these three, organizational memberships and interest appear most amenable to for our purposes (particularly because socialization forces have been regarded as "complicated, diffuse, and haphazard" [Owen, 2000, p. 63] and difficult to combat via intervention efforts). To better understand the young workers who participate, then, we divided our sample between young workers who have no organizational ties and those who have one or more, and investigated the political activity, civic skills and education levels of these two new groups. Next, we engaged in the same steps with the political interest variable (by dividing our sample into those with low versus high levels of political interest and similarly interrogating their political activity, civic skills, and education levels). Table 3 shows that the participation rates varied considerably in both cases, and that positive relationships can be located between organizational memberships, political activity and the possession of civic skills as well as between political interest, increased levels of participation and civic skills.

Table 3

*Working Youth--Organizational Memberships, Political Interest, and Political Participation*

| Political                              | No   | One or More                   | None or                      |                    |
|--|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
|  | Somewhat or a<br>Organizational<br>Memberships | Organizational<br>Memberships | Slight<br>Political Interest | Lot of<br>Interest |
|  | n=139  | n=90                          | n=141                        | n=88               |
| Political activity<br>(average)        | 1.01   | 1.88                          | 0.73                         | 1.74               |
| Civic skills<br>(average)              | 0.68   | 1.63                          | 0.58                         | 1.35               |
| Educational<br>attainment<br>(average) | 12.3   | 12.3                          | 12.2                         | 12.4               |

*Note:* Respondents were segmented in two ways: first by those with no organizational

memberships and those with one or more, and second by those with none or slight political

interest and those with somewhat or a lot of political interest.

Table 4 presents the results of multivariate analyses of the pathways to participation for young workers who do and do not belong to organizations, as well as for those who display high and low levels of political interest. First, consider the data in the columns addressing organizational membership. As illustrated there, political interest remains the only statistically significant predictor shared by those two columns. For workers who do not belong to organizations, education also emerges as a positive predictor of participation (and ethnicity appears to depress Latino participation in our sample). Workers who belong to organizations, though, are influenced not only by political interest, but also by political socialization and civic skills--suggesting that these young people enjoy both stronger psychological predispositions to politics and possess more sophisticated resources to engage in it. While it is important to note that the number of working

youth who report belonging to groups is modest, those with such memberships might be targeted for mobilization given that (1) they already have a moderate amount of the social connections that motivate them to politics through group memberships, (2) they possess and use the skills that can be helpful in politics, and (3) they seem to possess the basic psychological antecedents that predispose people to participation in politics.

A similar result emerges in the columns presenting data for working youth with high versus low levels of political interest. The contrast between these youth might be the most precise distinction we can make between working participators and non-participators. In the multivariate analysis, the participation of working youth with low political interest is predicted only by education (it is notable, here, that no other variables are influential). In contrast, politically interested

Table 4

*Working Youth--Organizational Memberships, Interest in Politics, and Political Activities*

|                         | No<br>Organizational<br>Memberships<br><br>n=139 | One or More<br>Organizational<br>Memberships<br><br>n=90 | Somewhat or Very<br>Interested in Politics<br><br>n=141 | Slightly or Not at All<br>Interested in Politics<br><br>n=88 |
|-------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Educational Attainment  | .162*  | .015   | .025  | .257*  |
| Hispanic                | -.180*   | -.040  | -.117   | -.110  |
| Female                  | -.080  | -.107  | -.138*  | -.021  |
| Civic Skills            | .080   | .240**   | .170*   | .033   |
| Mobilization Attempt    | .107   | .136   | .117  | .198   |
| Personal Relationships  | .040   | -.149  | -.161*  | .123   |
| Group Memberships       | --   | .150   | .306**  | -.020  |
| Interest in Politics    | .272**   | .219*  | .146*   | .020   |
| Political Socialization | .088   | .398**   | .297**  | .159   |
| Model Intercept         | -1.824   | -0.633   | -0.209  | -3.468   |
| Model Adjusted R-Square | 0.239  | 0.425  | 0.363   | 0.092  |

\* p. &lt; .05

\*\*p. &lt; .01

workers are influenced by their social connections (group memberships), psychological predispositions (interest and socialization) and resources (civic skills). As Table 4 also illustrates, young female workers with political interest are less likely to participate than their young male counterparts, and young workers with more personal relationships are less likely to participate than those with fewer

personal relationships.

## CONCLUSION

The goals of this paper have been to investigate the political activities of young workers and to begin to locate a few strategies for mobilizing them. These data show that, as expected, working youth possess fewer of the attributes that contribute to participation and are less politically active than their college-attending counterparts. The following paragraphs argue that examining the concepts of political resources, psychological predispositions, political opportunities and social connections produces a more nuanced description of the politics of working youth as well as a set of patterns that may help groups to engage this non-college bound cohort.

**Political Resources.** Two types of resources are explored here because they have been found to predict political engagement in prior works: education and civic skills. The results indicate that while education does not have a direct effect on most of the youth in this sample, it emerges as an influential predictor for working youth who are not tied to organizations or interested in politics. Additionally, this analysis shows that civic skills contribute to participation for workers but not for students. In these two instances, education and skills appear to be meaningful forces that make working youth (especially those who do not belong to organizations) more familiar with, and prone to engage in, democratic politics.

**Psychological Predispositions.** The most consistent predictors of participation for this sample appear to be two psychological predispositions to politics: political socialization and interest. Political socialization scholars have detailed that young people are most heavily influenced by their families, but are also shaped by schools, ethnic groups, voluntary associations, political events, friends and the media (Owen, 2000). Although there have been debates in this subfield as to the extent that "preadult learning enjoys primacy over later adult learning" and "structures adult orientations" (Beck & Jennings, 1982, p. 94), for the current purposes, it stands to reason that family and school place socialization are powerful forces for our sample because they are recent experiences for these young voters. Additionally,

because engagement begets engagement, these early motivating influences can set the stage for future activities even though their direct influence may diminish over time. Political interest, the other strong predictor throughout this study may similarly come from many sources, and--as Brady, Verba and Schlozman (1995) observe-- is as "likely to be a consequence as well as a cause of political activity" (p. 281). While our data cannot tell us how or where some of the young people in our sample obtained their sense of political awareness or consciousness, our data do show that this variable has a powerful impact on their participation.

**Social Connectedness.** Both group memberships and close personal relationships were examined as measures of social connectedness in this report. Group membership emerged as a stable and robust predictor of political participation among both working and college youth. This variable was likely strong because group memberships present a context where learning, skill acquisition and political opportunities may arise (Hanks, 1981). We were surprised to find that having many close family and friends and talking with them regularly did not have a positive influence on participation in this sample. In their well-cited research, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) have shown that social networks are an important source of political information, discussion and mobilization for adults. Yet their findings presume a civic element to these relationships, and subsequent studies on different samples have suggested that personal relationships can increase and decrease participation in public life (Brown & Brown, 2003; Johnson, 2001). Because the patterns located here depart from many expectations of the role of interpersonal relationships in politics as outlined by Huckfeldt and Sprague, and because younger people are more vulnerable to their peers than later in their adult lives, we encourage future scholars to investigate the role of personal relationships in fostering or suppressing political participation.

**Political Opportunity.** As prior studies show, young people are highly responsive to personal and individualized invitations to participate in politics (Gerber & Green, 2000; Green & Gerber, 2001). Our measure of mobilization was influential for

both college and working youth, and these data offer additional support that GOTV efforts, voter registration projects, and other initiatives can increase youth turnout.

**Other Variables.** We have also established that some attributes have small but negative effects on participation, especially for young voters. Being Latino, being female and communicating regularly with friends and family were all associated with lower levels of political participation in some of our models. The extant research shows that the gender gap in participation has disappeared generally but not universally--it still shows up among more vulnerable populations including young women, women heads of house and women of color, (Schlozman, Burns & Verba, 1994; Mann, 1999; Uhlaner, Cain & Kiewiet, 1989). Among Latinos, the participation gap has narrowed significantly but remains most pronounced for immigrants and low income Hispanics (Montoya, 2002; Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 1995).

In this report, we have demonstrated the prominence of some influences on participation that are relatively difficult to influence on a large scale--perhaps most prominently being political socialization, the most powerful predictor for working youth. In contrast, other influences like political interest, group memberships and civic skills hold more promise for social intervention. In the following paragraphs, we address some recommendations for schools and organizations with regard to these latter three factors.

First, consider the variable political interest--one of the most influential variables for both working and college youth. In research on adult voters, political interest is an important variable in predicting participation, but--interestingly--not one that is more influential than civic skills (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995). Our data show that the opposite appears to be true for younger Americans, as interest emerges as a more powerful predictor than skills for both working and college youth. Attempting to stimulate students' interest in politics in junior and senior high schools, then, appears to be a valuable step in leading them to politics after graduation--particularly for young folks who go directly into the workforce.

Civics education has received renewed attention by scholars and practitioners (Galston, 2001), and a set of best practices for engaging young people have emerged, including: an emphasis on discussion, a focus on local issues, an application of practical skills (such as reading charts and tables, writing letters, giving classroom presentations, etc.) and the opportunity to talk and debate about challenging social and political problems and controversies (Andolina, Keeter, Zukin & Jenkins, 2003; Galston, 2001; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 1997). These types of activities and curricula have been shown to inculcate youth with a profound sense that politics matters in their lives. Because piquing political interest is an important precursor to participation in this project, we strongly support the aforementioned teaching practices, and we are especially interested in seeing these teaching strategies extended to Latinos and female students (for it was these groups who exhibited the lowest levels of participation in our data).

Next, take group memberships--a second potent variable in this analysis. The relationship between group membership and participation is well documented for adults. In his work, Hanks (1981) details that the relationship also holds for younger citizens, particularly those who join "instrumental" groups (ones that feature some type of political connection or content--such as a community, educational or service group) as opposed to "expressive" groups (ones that contain far fewer political connections--such as sporting, social or hobby groups).

Thinking about these group-type distinctions can be useful when considering how this finding can be employed to mobilize young voters. A first occasion for intervention here may be found in Hanks' (1981) conclusion. As he writes, "participation of adolescents in voluntary associations, most of which takes place under the auspices of the school and is quite manipulable by school officials and community leaders, may have a number of positive consequences that carry into adult life" (p. 222). We, too, support work that encourages schools to imagine and make available opportunities for young people to join groups,

particularly ones that are “instrumental” in nature.

A second opening for intervention may be observed in the types of groups that young people join. In her overview of youth and organizational memberships, Comber (2003) lists 17 kinds of groups--ones that can easily be broken down into the “instrumental” and “expressive” types discussed by Hanks.<sup>9</sup> In comparing the joining habits of young people with “some college” versus those with “no college” experience, she finds (1) young people with some college experience are more likely, overall, to join groups than working youth, and (2) of the 17 types of groups, non-college students are only more likely to join four clubs than their college peers. At first blush, these patterns might not appear too promising for working youth--particularly because the three of the types of groups that non-college youth are more likely than their college counterparts to join are expressive (including self help groups; hobby, investment and garden clubs; and literary, arts or musical groups) while just one is instrumental (seniors groups) in nature. At second blush, however, it very well could be the case that the groups that working youth do join feature a degree of residential stability (a factor of social connectedness not fully explored here) and inter-generational memberships (another force that might increase social connectedness). In an earlier research evaluation conducted by the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation, we found that the contact between youth and inter-generational organizations in a field intervention during the 2002 campaign correlated with increased voting patterns for 18-24 year olds (Paolino, Jarvis & Hart, 2003). Thus, a second opening for intervention concerning group memberships may center on identifying local organizations whose membership lists feature both working youth and older citizens.

Finally, consider civic skills--a variable that emerged as a significant predictor of participation for working youth but not for college students. The variable of “civic skills” has received considerable academic attention (it has been studied in the fields of political science, education, youth development and psychology; it is known to be associated with

increased participation; and it has been shown to be gained at school and at the workplace--although gained most frequently in higher paying jobs), and yet scholars know that we have only begun to understand this predictor (that is, it is often not well defined; it can be difficult to measure; and it is likely to be related to other resources, see Kirlin, 2003). In the present study, we measured this concept by assessing “the most well defined and consistently referenced skills” (Kirlin, 2003) outlined by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) in the Civic Volunteerism Model. Although we followed their lead in investigating the role of skills in youth’s participation, given how influential skills were to working youth (as especially to working youth who belonged to organizations and who expressed an interest in politics), we encourage future researchers to continue to refine what is known about “civic skills” and young voters (for both working and college samples).

That civic skills were more significant to working youth than college students presents us with another opportunity for intervention in the schools, especially for young people who do not go on to college. As we advised in the earlier section on political interest, we strongly encourage that schools work to employ the emerging best practices for civic education (including focusing on local issues, holding class discussions, and addressing current events and controversies in class). Moreover, allocating class time to introducing and applying practical skills (such as reading charts and tables, writing letters, giving classroom presentations, etc.) may be a valuable step in helping to outfit youth who may not attend college with the tools to participate in politics.

This study marks one of the first explorations of working youth and their political participation. Our central findings are that the most promising predictor for participation for this group is political socialization (a concept that is difficult to influence with a specific intervention) followed by the presence of group membership(s) and civic skills. While more questions are ultimately posed than answered by our data (specifically with regard to the best means of targeting working youth in groups as well as which specific skills are

most powerful and why), we regard research in this area to be an important step, intellectually and normatively. Even though education has been steadily increasing in the United States, there are more young people who do not finish university programs than those who do. Working to understand the political attitudes and sensibilities of working youth offers a more fully rounded understanding of the state of democracy, today and into the future.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The OSR was established at U.T. in 1986, and has a strong reputation for its work with academic, government, non-profit, and business clients as well its vast experience in translation and bilingual interviewing.

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the survey featured items on the following topics (with the number of questions in parentheses): political attention (2), political socialization (2), activity and participation (4), social connectedness (22), mobility (3), mobilization (1) activity/participation (27), schooling and work (8), civic skills (4), barriers (7), political attitudes (3), and demographics (5). These items were drawn from the National Election Studies, the index on civic and political engagement (Andolina, Keeter, Zukin & Jenkins, 2003), the Civic Volunteerism Model (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995, p. 535), and the Berkman-Syme Social Network index (Berkman & Syme, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Though there were initial concerns about the political effects of the January 2004 primary election (particularly in Des Moines, Iowa), a close look at the data suggests that variances in responses between cities are statistically insignificant when other demographic data are considered.

<sup>4</sup> As Paolino, Jarvis and Hart (2003) found, the participation rates of registered voters in these three cities mirror those of a representative national sample; moreover, the attitudes and information levels of young registered voters in these cities match those in other areas (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). The 18-24 year-old cohort is among the most expensive to survey (given their mobility, reliance on cell phones, and nontraditional schedules); attempts to collect a random sample via random-digit-dialing methods would be cost-prohibitive.

<sup>5</sup> In our survey, we attempted to record these students' courses of study (in order to determine whether or not they were future bachelor's students). Such attempts were difficult to standardize and thus associate's and certificate students were dropped from the current study and will be examined in more nuanced ways in other WEPAY projects.

<sup>6</sup> Many studies of this nature use the same analytical methodology (see Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Following other studies on this age group, we controlled for ethnicity and gender in our analyses (see Highton & Wolfinger, 2001). In this study, several independent variables were scalar measures, including educational attainment, group memberships, and interest in politics. Others were coded as dummy variables, including the measures for gender, Hispanic ethnicity, and personal mobilization. A third set of variables were created as indexes: political skills and personal relationships. A full description of these variables can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>7</sup> The measure of political participation used in this project is largely derived from the Civic Volunteerism Model (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). There, the authors use an index of eight measures of participation: voting, campaign work, campaign contributions, contacting, protesting, community board membership, informal community work, and membership in a political organization. We employ five of the original eight measures of the model, omitting campaign contributions, campaign work, and organizational board membership because they are uncommon practices for 19 to 23 year-olds. The inter-item correlations for each of the variables in the index are lower than 0.3. A reliability measure of the index reveals a Cronbach's alpha of .576, showing that the variables in combination are a good measure of a latent construct.



<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that these self-reported values are likely to be inflated by the 10-12 % self-report bias in citizen responses to turnout questions (Belli et. al, 2001). Furthermore, prior research shows that college students are more likely to inflate their participatory behaviors to follow the norm of voting than those with lower levels of education, so their self-report data must be interpreted with caution (Silver, Anderson & Abramson, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, the “instrumental” groups include veterans’ groups, charities or social welfare organizations, parent-teacher associations, professional trade or business associations, political groups, neighborhood associations, labor unions, service or fraternal organizations, ethnic, nationality or civil rights organizations and seniors groups. The “expressive” groups include youth groups, internet groups, sports club, league or outdoor activities, self-help groups, religiously affiliated organizations, hobby, investment or garden clubs, and literary, arts or musical groups.

## APPENDIX

### VARIABLE CODING

- Educational Attainment = total years of schooling (ranges from 11-17 years)
- Hispanic = dummy variable for Hispanic ethnicity (0 = Anglo, 1 = Hispanic)
- Female = dummy variable for female gender (0 = male, 1 = female)
- Civic Skills = 0-4 index of positive responses to having done the following activities in the past six months: written a formal letter, made decisions in a meeting, planned or chaired a meeting, and given a speech
- Personal mobilization = dummy variable for whether the respondent has been personally asked to vote (0 = not been personally asked to vote, 1 = has been personally asked to vote)
- Personal relationships = 0-15 index of number of close friends, number of close relatives, and number of friends and relatives that the respondent sees at least once a month (0-5 score for each of the three responses, added for each respondent)
- Group memberships = 0-4 index of membership in the following types of organizations: social or recreational group, group concerned with young people, group concerned with community betterment, charity or service, and academic group
- Interest in politics = 0-3 index of interest in politics, 0 = not at all interested, 1 = slightly interested, 2 = somewhat interested, 3 = very interested
- Political socialization = 0-2 index of political discussions in the home, based on the question: at the time that you were 16, how frequent were political discussions in the home? 0 = never happened, 1 = they happened sometimes, 2 = they were frequent

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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