



RACE matters

Unequal Opportunities for CIVIC PARTICIPATION*

Why Equal Opportunity is Important

- We know much of what is needed to foster civic participation. Civic participation is greatest for those with higher socioeconomic status, those who are connected to their communities through home ownership, and those who get asked by others to participate.
- The consequences of failing to have robust civic participation are far-reaching. The very concept of democracy is premised on having an inclusive process of deliberation and widespread engagement in electoral and other civic processes. The strength of the nation's civil society, and the ability to protect one's interests, derive in large part from the degree to which we realize our political ideals. The degree of a community's resilience is linked to the level of civic engagement.
- Embedded racial inequities produce unequal opportunities for civic participation. Systematic policies, practices, and stereotypes work against individuals, families, and communities of color to affect their opportunity for civic participation. We need to understand the consequences of these embedded racial inequities, how disparities are produced, and how they can be eliminated in order to ensure that all individuals and families have the same opportunity to be civic participants.
- Differential requests for engagement. Individuals who are asked to participate in political activities are more likely to do so. Yet, people of color are less likely to be asked to participate by politicians and activists: 56% of Whites, 40% of African Americans, and only 25% of Latinos report being recruited.³
- Disparities in trust for government. While many propose a strong relationship between social trust and civic engagement, a number of studies document how feelings of linked fates within minority groups and perceptions of prejudice and discrimination fuel civic engagement and political participation by African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans.⁴ Among youth 15-25, 65% of Whites indicate trust in government compared to 59% of African Americans and 56% of Hispanics.⁵
- Differential treatment of voters. Despite legislation prohibiting discrimination, voters of color continue to experience differential treatment and intimidation at the polls, including less accessible polling places,⁶ being photographed, receiving leaflets with inaccurate information intended to suppress voting, and simply not having the votes they cast counted.⁷ Over half of the votes not counted in the 2000 Presidential election were cast by African Americans, who represent only 11% of the electorate.

Barriers to Equal Opportunity

- Education, income, and occupation. When education, income, and occupation are held constant, African Americans participate in most political activities (campaigning, contributing, contacting elected officials, registering, and voting) at a rate equal to or greater than Whites. On the other hand, even controlling for these factors, Latinos are less likely to participate in political activities, in part because of naturalization and residency requirements. The same findings hold for non-political civic engagement, such as charitable work and contributions. Because African Americans and Latinos as groups have lesser educational, income, and occupational opportunities than Whites as a group, their civic participation rates are predictably lower.¹
- Home ownership. Home owners are significantly more likely than those who rent to participate in political and civic activities. In 2002 home ownership rates were 74% for Whites and 47% for Blacks and Latinos.²
- Disenfranchisement. Specific policies regarding voter eligibility prevent electoral participation disproportionately by individuals and groups of color. Naturalization and residency requirements keep almost 50% of adult Asians and 40% of adult Latinos from voting.⁸ Laws barring ex-felons from voting after they have served their time disproportionately impact African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. States with large Black populations are more likely than states with small Black populations to disenfranchise ex-felons. Almost 15% of the Black male population has lost its right to vote.⁹

1. L. Frasure & L. F. Williams, "Civic Disparities & Civic Differences," University of Maryland, Civic Engagement Working Paper #3, 17 December 2002.

2. "Wealth Gap Widens between Whites and Hispanics," Pew Hispanic Center, 2004, www.pewhispanic.org.

3. S. Verba et al., *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Harvard University Press, 1995.

4. Frasure & Williams, above.

5. www.civicyouth.org/research/products/National_Youth_Survey_outside5.htm.

6. "Congress to Begin Hearings..." NALEO Legislative Update, October 13, 2005.

7. L. Guinier & G. Torres, *The Miner's Canary*, Harvard University Press, 2002.

8. P. Lien, "Who Votes in Multiracial America?" in *Black and Multiracial Politics in America*, New York University Press, 2000.

9. C. Uggen & J. Manza, "Political Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States," *American Sociological Review*, 2002: 777-803.

* This Fact Sheet focuses mostly on civic participation in the electoral process. A broader focus on civic engagement through the lens of embedded racial inequities would emphasize the value—indeed, the necessity—of other forms of civic activism to challenging barriers to opportunity and promoting racial equity.

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The Consequences of Unequal Opportunity

- **Differential voter registration and turnout.** In 2000, 72% of Whites, 68% of Blacks, 57% of Latinos, and 52% of Asian Pacific Islanders were registered to vote.¹⁰
- **The following percentages in each group aged 25 and over voted in 2004:** 69% of Whites, 63% of Blacks and those identified as mixed race, 51% of Latinos and Native Americans, and 46% of Asian Pacific Islanders.¹¹
- **Community disenfranchisement.** Because the Census counts prisoners where they are incarcerated, the largely rural, more so White prison-hosting communities gain population and urban, more so African American and Latino, prisoner-sending communities lose population. Legislative districts are drawn and government funds are allocated on the basis of population size, thus shifting funds and representation from communities of color to rural predominantly White populations.¹²
- **Differential ability to make campaign contributions.** Of campaign contributions above \$200, 89% come from predominantly White zip codes, 3% from Black zip codes, 2% from Latino zip codes, and <1% from Asian zip codes.¹³ To the extent that campaign contributions increase the opportunity to have one's interests heard, heeded, and reproduced, Whites have a decided advantage.
- **Disparities in overall civic engagement.** These forms of participation are influenced by the availability of time and money. Whites are more likely to be active in non-political organizations, at 39%, followed by 34% of Blacks and 20% of Latinos. They are also more likely to dedicate time to charitable work, at 38%, followed by Blacks at 34% and Latinos at 29%. Seventy-one percent of Whites make charitable contributions, compared to 56% of Blacks and 52% of Latinos.¹⁴
- **Differences in volunteering.** Volunteering – doing unpaid work through or for an organization – varies by race. In 2004, 31% of Whites, 21% of Blacks, 19% of Asians, and 15% of Latinos volunteered at least once. Lack of time was the biggest reason for not volunteering among all groups but significantly more so for Asians than others. African Americans who volunteered gave the greatest number of hours, with religious organizations being the likely recipients of their time. Religious organizations were also the greatest recipients of volunteering by Whites and Asians. Latinos gave the most time to education and youth services.¹⁵

Strategies to Promote Equal Opportunity

- **Promoting strong community-based and civic organizations of color.** These have replaced political parties as mobilizers of the unmobilized. Research shows that where such groups exist, civic engagement and political participation are greater than in other similar communities. Examples include Centro de Tepeyac mobilizing Mexican immigrants, local branches of the NAACP and Urban League, and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in New York City.¹⁶
- **Assuring fair treatment for all voters.** Passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and its subsequent amendments have significantly increased electoral participation by racial and ethnic minority groups. A large number of national civil rights groups have endorsed renewal of key provisions of the Act when they come up for reauthorization in 2007, and bipartisan support is expected in Congress.¹⁷
- **Enfranchising marginalized adults.** Since the mid-1990s, at least eight states have made their laws that disenfranchised people who have served time in prison less restrictive.¹⁸
- **Promoting home ownership.** Because home ownership is predictive of civic participation, efforts to increase home ownership among people of color should have positive impact on voting, volunteering, and other forms of civic engagement. Resources such as "Reaching Emerging and Underserved Home Ownership Markets"¹⁹ offer guidance for institutional policy and practice to promote home ownership among minorities and immigrants.

10. U.S. Bureau of the Census, www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.

11. M.H. Lopez & E. Kirby, "Electoral Engagement Among Minority Youth," Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, July 2005.

12. "Diluting Democracy: Census Quirk Fuels Prison Expansion," Prison Policy Initiative, 2004, www.prisonpolicy.org.

13. "Color of Money" 2005, www.colorofmoney.org.

14. S. Verba et al., 1995, above.

15. "Volunteering in the U.S.," Bureau of Labor Statistics, www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm.

16. Frasure & Williams, above.

17. "Congress to Begin Hearings..." above.

18. "Summary of Changes to State Felon Disenfranchisement Law, 1865–2003," The Sentencing Project, www.sentencing-project.org.

19. A. I. Schoenholtz & K. Stanton Jones, LISC, February 2003, www.lisc.org.

