

# The anti-civic effects of popular culture on American teenagers

LA PARTICIPACIÓN Y CONCIENCIA CÍVICA SON INDISPENSABLES PARA LA PRESERVACIÓN DE LA DEMOCRACIA EN ESTADOS UNIDOS. LAS COMUNIDADES QUE SON FIRMES EN SUS COMPROMISOS CÍVICOS ESTÁN EN MEJORES CONDICIONES PARA PROMOVER LA PROSPERIDAD, GARANTIZAR LA RESOLUCIÓN DE LOS PROBLEMAS COLECTIVOS Y VIGILAR LAS ACTUACIONES DEL ESTADO. SIN EMBARGO, EN EL AÑO 2002, HAY VARIOS INDICADORES QUE APUNTAN AL HECHO DE QUE LA CULTURA CÍVICA EN EE.UU. SE ESTÁ DETERIORANDO. EN LOS ÚLTIMOS DÉCADAS, EL DESCENSO DE LA VOTACIÓN EN LOS COMICIOS ES SIGNIFICATIVO. LO MISMO SE PUEDE DECIR DE LA CONFIANZA RESPECTO AL GOBIERNO. TAMBIÉN SON PREOCUPANTES LA FALTA DE CONOCIMIENTO CÍVICO ENTRE LOS JÓVENES AMERICANOS Y LA DISMINUCIÓN EN LA PARTICIPACIÓN EN LAS ORGANIZACIONES CÍVICAS DE TODO TIPO: LAS QUE ESTÁN PROMOVIDAS POR LAS IGLESIAS; LAS ORGANIZACIONES DE VOLUNTARIOS Y ASOCIACIONES FRATERNALES; Y GRUPOS DE AYUDA FORMADOS POR LAS MUJERES Y LOS SINDICATOS. ESTAS TENDENCIAS SE DEBEN A MUCHAS CAUSAS. ESTE ARTÍCULO ESTUDIA CÓMO LA CULTURA POPULAR INFLUYE LA PARTICIPACIÓN Y CONCIENCIA CÍVICA DE LOS JÓVENES EN MASSACHUSETTS. EN GENERAL, LA CULTURA POPULAR HA INFLUIDO NEGATIVAMENTE LA VIDA CÍVICA; AUNQUE, LOS EFECTOS NO SON UNILATERALES Y, ADEMÁS, PUEDEN SER ATENUADOS A TRAVÉS DE FAMILIAS SANAS Y ESCUELAS DE CALIDAD COMPROMETIDAS NO SÓLO CON LA EDUCACIÓN ACADÉMICA SINO TAMBIÉN CON LA EDUCACIÓN.

PALABRAS CLAVE: CULTURA POPULAR; HÁBITOS CÍVICOS; ADOLESCENTES; EDUCACIÓN CÍVICA

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC AWARENESS IS ESSENTIAL TO THE MAINTENANCE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY. STRONG CIVIC COMMUNITIES SERVE TO PROMOTE PROSPERITY, ENSURE THE RESOLUTION OF COLLECTIVE PROBLEMS, AND ACT AS A CHECK UPON THE POWER OF THE STATE. BUT IN 2002, THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT, ACROSS A WIDE RANGE OF INDICATORS, AMERICA'S CIVIC CULTURE IS IN DECLINE. VOTING RATES HAVE FALLEN RAPIDLY OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, AND SO TOO HAS TRUST IN GOVERNMENT. EQUALLY TROUBLING

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**IS THE DISCONCERTING DEARTH OF CIVIC KNOWLEDGE AMONG AMERICAN YOUTHS AND THE DROP IN PARTICIPATION, AMONG ALL AMERICANS, IN NUMEROUS CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS, FROM CHURCH-AFFILIATED GROUPS TO VOLUNTARY AND FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS AS WELL AS WOMEN'S AUXILIARIES AND UNIONS. THERE ARE MANY CAUSES FOR THESE TRENDS. THIS PAPER EXAMINES HOW POPULAR CULTURE AFFECTS CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC AWARENESS AMONG A GROUP OF PARTICULARLY ACTIVE TEENAGERS IN MASSACHUSETTS. WE FOUND THAT POPULAR CULTURE HAS A GENERALLY NEGATIVE INFLUENCE ON CIVIC LIFE BUT THAT ITS EFFECTS ARE NOT ONE-SIDED AND THAT IT CAN BE MITIGATED BY STRONG FAMILIES AND QUALITY SCHOOLS COMMITTED TO AN ACADEMIC AND CIVIC EDUCATION.**

KEY WORDS: POPULAR CULTURE; CIVIC DISPOSITIONS; TEENAGERS; CIVIC EDUCATION.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

This essay examines the ways in which American popular culture seems to have affected the civic dispositions of today's teenagers, as viewed by teachers and teenagers themselves. Contrary to what many observers of American life today have proposed, the ultimate challenge to our civic culture from the entertainment industry, commercial advertising, and news media may originate less from their negative depictions of government institutions and political leaders or their promotion of sexuality and violence, and more from the basic premise of popular culture itself. In 2002, popular culture and narcissism appear to be virtually synonymous. The underlying values it promotes –values centered around materialism, cynicism, and self-centeredness– have acted to undermine the communal ethos that is necessary for robust civic communities.

However, on the basis of information we obtained from surveys of and interviews with a small group of unusually active high school students and from a survey of a small group of government/civics teachers, we cannot heap all the blame for America's civic decline on popular culture alone. They argued that other factors, such as committed and active parents, as well as an education system built on high standards and expectations –rather than disengagement from popular culture– are just as and probably more important in the creation of a strong sense of civic consciousness. Moreover, popular culture's relationship to civic values, however indirect, is not entirely negative.

In this essay, we examine what this group of high school students and government/civics teachers see as the central images and messages emanating from the entertainment industry, daily newspapers, popular magazines, and the Internet. We indicate how they view the effects of popular culture on young people's attitudes towards our government and on the value of participation in political or civic activities. We also describe why the unique group of students we interviewed has chosen to participate in civic life despite what they perceive as the negative effects of popular culture on them and on their peers. What do these students see as countervailing influences? By examining what teachers and students see as the negative effects of popular culture on young people's civic dispositions, and by noting the factors that a small group of teenagers believe influenced them to participate in civic life,

we hope to contribute to a larger discussion of how our social, political, and educational institutions might seek to counter these negative influences.

## 2. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND POPULAR CULTURE: THE GENERAL CASE

Over the past several decades, social and political changes, both in America and throughout the world, have expanded the boundaries of democracy. These changes are now, however, colliding against far less positive trends in our communal life and in popular culture – trends that pose a challenge to traditional beliefs about what makes American democracy work.

As far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Americans held a firm commitment to civic life. To Thomas Jefferson, for example, an educated and engaged citizenry was essential to the functioning of a democratic society. “Experience hath shewn [sic],” Jefferson declared, that even under the best forms of government “those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny”. The surest way of preventing tyranny, he continued, “would be to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts” so that they would “be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompted to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes...” (Jefferson, 1990: 39). Jefferson and his fellow Founders realized that education and civic values were particularly necessary because the American experiment in democracy was both unique and fragile. It was unique because it was premised upon the idea of representative government, popular sovereignty, and equality in an age of monarchical dynasties; it was fragile because such an experiment had never been attempted in all history on such a grand scale. Before the American Revolution, and save for the one exception of the Roman Republic under Cicero, only a handful of republican governments in small Greek city states and Swiss cantons had ever survived for any length of time (Ellis, 2001: 6). The Revolution and the subsequent advancement of both American civilization and American democracy changed that. As historian Gordon Wood has written, Americans destroyed existing notions of aristocracy and “brought respectability and even dominance to ordinary people long held in contempt...” (Wood, 1992: 8). Yet, none of this could have been accomplished without the informed and active citizenry that Jefferson believed was so important.

Few observers of American life have appreciated this fact more than the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited America in the 1830s and subsequently published his famous *Democracy in America*. As no other person had done so well before him, and few after him, Tocqueville explained why the American experiment in democracy was so successful. The key, he argued, lay in the commitment of its citizens to education and civic life. Americans of all ages, he wrote, and “all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations”. They were also, he continued, well-informed. They knew the laws and the interests of the nation and had “the faculty to understand them” (Johnson, 1997: 39). Americans believed that power resided in them and “scarcely an individual is to be met with who would venture to conceive or, still less, to express the idea of seeking it elsewhere”. The people, he concluded, “reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe. They are the cause and the aim of all things; everything comes from them, and everything is absorbed in them” (Tocqueville, 1945: 59-60).

In 2001, over a century and one-half after Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*, much has changed. Positively, American’s definitions of rights and citizenship have been extended to include

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women and black Americans. Equally important, the values of liberal democracy have now triumphed over large parts of the globe; both right and left wing authoritarianism have been thoroughly discredited (Fukuyama, 1992). Despite these important changes, civic commitment remains as important today as it did during Jefferson's time - perhaps more so given the responsibilities that Americans will now have to assume in the struggle against international terrorism. High levels of civic participation help to create a more prosperous and better functioning nation, as well as a nation more capable of confronting the demands of war. Moreover, as Robert Putnam has noted, "an impressive and growing body of research suggests that civic connections help make us healthy, wealthy, and wise".

Strong civic communities enable the resolution of collective problems, they speed the spread of information and the processing of common business transactions, and they make individuals more aware of their relationship to larger social needs (Putnam, 2000: 287-289). Finally, social capital (or shared communal norms and social ties) also serve as a check upon the power of the state. Scholars agree on the importance of social capital. They also agree that America's civic culture is in poor shape. As Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina have written, "Americans of many persuasions" argue that "troubles for our democracy may lie in a loss of social ties or in the changing universe of voluntary associations". (Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999: 3). In fact, across a wide range of indicators, including among our nation's youth, scholars have documented the weakening of America's civic culture.

The first and possibly the most striking indicator of civic decline is the steady drop in voting rates. Between 1840 and 1920, voting rates in the presidential elections often surpassed 60% of eligible voters. Outside of the South, voting rates often exceeded 80% of eligible voters. Even as late as the 1960 presidential election, almost 63% of Americans of voting age went to the polls (Putnam, 2000: 31-36). In the past three presidential elections, however, participation rates have hovered around 50%; for Congressional elections, the percentages of eligible voters who vote are even smaller. These trends are most striking among American youth. In 1972, a year after 18 year olds were given the right to vote with the passage of the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment, 50% of 18 to 24 year olds voted in either the presidential election or a Congressional election. In 1996, only 32% voted, and in 1998 only 20% voted (Tolo, 1999).

A second indicator of civic decline, one that particularly applies to our nation's youth, is a disconcerting dearth of civic knowledge. Americans' grasp of both our own nation's history and of contemporary events, despite an overall increase in levels of education, is no greater than that of previous generations. Young Americans, moreover, are less likely to read a newspaper and less likely to watch TV news than people their age did a generation earlier (Putnam, 2000: 36). Even more striking is young American's tenuous understanding of American history. In 2001, 57% of grade 12 students failed to perform at the "basic" level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for U.S. history. Only 10% of seniors scored well enough to be considered "proficient". Such results pose a fundamental challenge to all educators. As Diane Ravitch remarked, "one can only feel alarm" that high school seniors "know so little about their nation's history and express so little capacity to reflect on its meaning" (Schemo, 2002).

A third indicator of civic decline is the precipitous loss of trust in government. After years of government scandals and political cover-ups, from Watergate to President Clinton's imbroglio with a White House intern, many Americans have adopted a decidedly negative attitude towards politics in

general, and politicians in particular. Throughout the 1960s, for example, almost 75% of Americans argued that one could trust the government to do what was right “all or most of the time”. Today, 75% of Americans would agree that one can not trust the government to do what is right “all or most of the time” (Putnam, 2000: 47) According to Alan Wolfe, “the lack of confidence Americans have in politicians cannot be overemphasized” (Wolfe, 2001: 110).

A fourth and final indicator of civic decline is the drop in membership in numerous civic organizations, from church-affiliated groups to voluntary and fraternal organizations as well as women’s auxiliaries and unions. As Robert Putnam has written in his influential book, *Bowling Alone*, “political interest and participation, church attendance, community projects, charitable giving, organizational involvement - as we have seen, all these forms of civic involvement and more besides have declined largely, if not exclusively, because of the inexorable replacement of a highly civic generation by others that are much less so” (Putnam, 2000: 250). In growing numbers, Americans have dropped out of such civic and professional organizations as the American Association of University Women, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Elks Club, and the League of Women Voters. Additionally, Theda Skocpol notes, America’s existing civic universe is becoming dominated by professionals who operate national organizations and not by ordinary Americans working at the local level. Recent political, economic, and social changes, Skocpol writes, have produced a “new civic America largely run by advocates and managers without members and marked by yawning gaps between immediate involvements and larger undertakings” (Skocpol, 1999: 462). Less educated Americans, in particular, have been avoiding civic participation in growing numbers. As William Galston and Peter Levine have argued, those with a high school diploma but no college education are now 32% less likely to participate in any association than they were 25 years ago (Galston and Levine, 1998: 32).

Loss of interest in civic life has been particularly pronounced among young Americans who –at least until September 11, 2001– have had no great war to motivate their interest in national or world history, or any great political battles to fight. There are, of course, qualifications to this rather bleak picture, as we shall document, as well as a recent increase in volunteering among young people over the last decade - but the general portrait of today’s youth as uninvolved with civic life remains (Putnam, 2000: 65). Indeed, according to the University of California’s annual surveys of college freshmen across the United States, most students prefer the pursuit of material goals such as financial well-being over “influencing the political structure” as their most important life goal. Further, only 28.1% of entering college freshman in 2000 declared that they were interested in following political affairs, compared to 60.3% in 1966. And finally, only 16.4% stated that they discuss politics frequently (UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2000).

What do today’s youth spend their time on? The answer to this question is clear: our nation’s youth have increasingly focused their attention on popular culture through movies, video games, music, the Internet, and television. Over the past several decades, the amount of time that all Americans, and particularly young Americans, spend watching TV and other modern forms of popular entertainment has exploded. Most studies of TV viewing estimate that Americans spend three hours a day in front of the television and, as Robert Putnam writes, “habituation to omnipresent television is much more pervasive among younger generations” (Putnam, 2000: 225). Young Americans also spend large amounts of time playing video games and sitting in front of a computer.

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Over one third of male college freshmen play video games for at least three hours a week and, according to a U.S Census Bureau report, almost 90% of all school aged kids use computers either at home or in school (UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2000. *New York Times*, September 7, 2001). True, much of the time that teenagers spend in front of computers is devoted to school work but a large amount of this time is also devoted to surfing the Internet for entertainment. And, as with TV viewing, the younger one is, the more likely he or she is to spend time on the Internet. When one factors in other activities like movie viewing and listening to music, it becomes evident that teenagers are devoting an enormous amount of energy on activities that have little to do with civic involvement—or academic achievement.

These trends provide at least one clue as to why American civic life is in decline. Indeed, over the past several years a diverse array of scholars have been pointing to the anti-civic nature of popular culture, to its promotion of the material and aesthetic interests of the individual over the social and political interests of the community (Bennett, 1994. Himmelfarb, 2001. Hymowitz, 2000). This does not imply, however, that popular culture alone is responsible for the poor condition of American civic life. There are other, more important factors. Such factors include major demographic changes such as the entry of more women into the workforce and the resultant decline in the amount of time families have to spend on community and political affairs (Putnam, 2000). Another important cause is the changing shape of America's political universe. After the 1960s and particularly since the end of the Cold War, there appeared to be no great ideological battles to be fought, no noble causes to struggle for. The Civil Rights movement had triumphed, America won the Cold War, the economy boomed, and most politicians moved towards the center. Why become involved when things are going so well? This sense of complacency ended on September 11, 2001 but it remains to be seen how the horrifying events of that day will change Americans' civic behavior over the long term. A final factor is the technological transformation of entertainment through movies, the Internet, and television. This transformation produced a reduction in the time that individuals spend outside of their homes while increasing the amount of time they spend in front of computer and television screens. And it is through these screens that much of popular culture is disseminated.

Popular culture's relationship to the civic dispositions of young Americans is not entirely clear. What do teenagers and teachers themselves see as the relationship? In order to shed some light on this question, we surveyed a group of Massachusetts students who are highly engaged in a state political organization created in 1971 to ensure that students have a say in the educational policy decisions that affect them<sup>1</sup>. The State Student Advisory Council (SSAC) is a group of 60 students elected by the 400 members of its five regional councils; the chair of the SSAC is a full-voting member of the

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts is the only state in the country with an elected student as a full-voting member on its Board of Education. In addition to advising the chairperson about how to vote on Board of Education issues, the SSAC pursues goals and activities decided upon by its regional and state councils each year. In its 30 years of existence, the SSAC has written, filed, and lobbied for a number of laws that affect students. Most recently, the SSAC filed an amendment to Chapter 622, the anti-discrimination law, to protect students based on race, sex, religion, color, national origin, and sexual orientation. The SSAC has also written publications and testified at hearings about legislative and policy issues including the Education Reform Act, Time and Learning Regulations, and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

Massachusetts Board of Education. We also surveyed a group of civics/government teachers from across the country attending the Northeast Regional Institute on "We the People..." in Boston. "We the People..." institutes address the history, philosophy, and contents of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and are sponsored by the Center for Civic Education in California. Though these students and teachers are by no means "average" with respect to their civic interests or concerns, we hoped to learn from them why some teenagers choose to become involved when so many of their peers are apathetic, how they view the messages and effects of popular culture, and what they think might be done to develop stronger civic dispositions among teenagers.

Responses were received from 17 students and 30 teachers. In addition, focused interviews were held with a smaller group of students. Of the 17 students who responded to the survey, approximately half are male and half are female. All are between the ages of 16 and 18. Most graduated in 2001, though five expect to graduate in 2002 and one in 2003. All of them are attending or plan to attend college and the largest number (6) plan to study political science. The students represent 15 school districts across the state of Massachusetts.

### **3. THE EFFECTS OF POPULAR CULTURE ON CIVIC DISPOSITIONS: SOME SPECIFICS**

It is common belief that teenagers are particularly attuned and receptive to the messages transmitted through popular culture. We therefore sought to gauge these students' exposure to popular culture by determining the number of hours they might spend in an average week watching television, listening to music, going to movies, surfing the Internet for nonacademic purposes, and reading for pleasure. Listening to music was the most popular activity listed by the 17 students, with a majority of students listening to up to three hours of music per day. More than half indicated that they watch television fewer than five hours per week – a far lower average than most Americans – and only two responded that they watch more than ten hours of TV a week. Most go to the movies less than once a week and a majority surf the Internet for fun fewer than five hours per week. A large majority of students reported that they read for pleasure no more than two hours a week. For all of the respondents, their exposure to these various activities is not limited or regulated by their parents or guardians.

When asked what they see as the central images, messages, and values transmitted by popular culture, some common themes emerged. Overall, students were critical of the messages being propagated by popular culture, though their negative views don't appear to inhibit them from enjoying popular culture as entertainment. As one student commented: "There are fewer and fewer values being transmitted by popular culture. Values are less often being taught in the home, it seems, and it is unclear what values exactly are being taught by television and music. Though I enjoy today's pop culture thoroughly, I can't say that it is the best culture to grow up on". Many of the students listed money, success, beauty, violence, illicit behavior, and commercialism as the central images transmitted through popular culture. Other themes cited were self-fulfillment, selfishness, and a general "me" attitude, being "cool", and engaging in rebellious behavior. As one student noted: popular culture is "all about doing things outside the norm, being a rebel... Doing drugs, having sex all the time and just doing what you want...". Teachers surveyed concurred with the students' responses, citing a focus on self, wealth, and images of beauty and perfection as the central messages.

However, despite the fact that students generally feel bombarded with these negative images,

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several of them noted that popular culture in and of itself is not the main problem. The important thing, they noted, is how the messages of popular culture are used to engage and teach students. Teenagers, one student commented, are not “hapless victims of pop culture”. Another noted: “You can’t blame pop culture for the faults of other institutions”, such as education or family life. These students felt that the problem is not necessarily that the negative messages exist, but that many young people are not taught how to filter those messages. Moreover, those teenagers who have been taught, either at home or in school, how to examine the negative messages of popular culture feel that those negative images and messages can be used in a positive way as tools for discussion. These students suggested that the solution, therefore, is not to censor popular culture, but

to teach young people how to analyze it critically. Finally, some students also insisted that popular culture has had a positive effect on civic attitudes by portraying the variety of people in this country. A television show popular among teenagers, “Dawson’s Creek”, was mentioned as highlighting the diverse nature of American society in a constructive manner. In addition, students view some popular music as having a positive effect on their social awareness. The “Lilith Fair”, an annual, nationwide musical tour highlighting and celebrating female musicians, is one example. Though the majority of messages transmitted by popular culture and directed at teenagers may be counter to civic values and behavior, they perceive some countervailing influences.

As might be expected, students responding to the survey feel that political and governmental institutions and figures are portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative way by popular culture. Respondents noted that political figures are typically portrayed as “negative, sleazy, slimy cheats and crooks...” and that “... they are corrupt, selfish, and don’t care what we (especially youth) want or need”. Other students commented:

“It seems that being intelligent and honorable are only ‘bonuses’ in today’s society,” and “the institutions have become a laughingstock”.

Students were quick to point out that even news networks have started to resemble entertainment networks by highlighting and glorifying personal scandals as real “news”, thereby perpetuating the image of politics as entertainment. In focused interviews, a couple of students questioned the choices of the media in terms of the stories they highlight. They noted that serious issues and stories do exist, but that the media often choose to focus on personal scandals and scurrilous attacks on political figures. The teachers responding to the survey generally concurred with the students’ perceptions, underscoring the fact that politicians are portrayed by the media as immoral and corrupt, but often deservedly so. Many of the teachers commented on the recent scandals involving governmental figures, noting that both the actual events and the media’s incessant focus on those events do much to destroy youths’ faith in our political institutions and principles.

Though the majority of students and teachers surveyed felt that popular culture transmits mostly negative messages about governmental figures and institutions, there were some positive influences mentioned. One teacher commented on the positive effects of MTV and its “Rock the Vote” campaign to encourage voting among teenagers. A student also noted the positive influence of “The West Wing”, a television show about a fictitious modern day president, commenting that it has “made a dramatic and positive impact on the way politics is perceived” by showing that “individual people can change things” and that “smart people are in government”.

When asked whether popular culture’s portrayal of political institutions and figures has affected



their attitudes toward civic engagement (in the sense of political involvement in community life), student responses were mixed. About half commented that it has not affected them at all, saying things such as:

“First hand experience is the biggest influence”. Or, “It hasn’t. I never believed it. If anything, I wanted to prove it wrong”. Or, “I do not conform to popular culture... I do what I feel is right”. Or, “Not at all. The more I learn about government, the more the media view is irrelevant (although it may still be entertaining)”.

Others, however, commented that the media portrayal has negatively affected their political engagement, saying “I look at political institutions with a lot of skepticism and cynicism. Occasionally this dulls my urge to help out”. Or, “I would... become involved in politics, but it appears that I may just be wasting my time and energy... I plan to keep my voluntary status and enjoy politics on my own level, but never on a professional level”.

However, the negative portrayal by the media doesn’t always have a deleterious effect on students’ political engagement. Some students responded that it has actually spurred them to become involved: “It has made me want to get involved and make changes for (what I consider to be) the better”. Or, “It makes me want to beat the stereotype”.

Nevertheless, a majority of those surveyed felt that political institutions are portrayed in such a way as to inhibit most of their peers from becoming involved in school or community organizations. Their reasons varied: “Yes, many of my friends look at government as ineffective and unimportant. Too many also view government officials as corrupt, a stereotype which keeps many from government service”. Or, “Yes, not many of my friends would even vote for student council elections, because they feel that the wrong people get elected and other reasons...” Or, “I think the general feeling towards government from people my age is that we can’t really do much about anything and we don’t really have a say in what happens because we are unable to vote and adults often don’t take the time to listen to our concerns”.

Others responded that popular culture alone is not to blame for students’ unwillingness to become involved in political activities. As one student noted, “Apathy springs from reluctance of kids to commit and seem uncool”.

The teachers were more pessimistic about the effects of popular culture on political participation among youths. Many believe that the negative portrayal of governmental figures and institutions does inhibit political involvement. Reasons cited mirrored the students’ responses for the most part. One teacher felt that there are no popular political role models and no consistent messages about the importance of civic participation. Other teachers responded that teenagers do not view political participation as “cool”. On a different note, one teacher commented that popular culture inhibits political involvement among youth because “politics seems to be controlled by ‘old’ folks”. Another responded that the “machinery of government is too complicated and formal” for young people to get involved.

Alternatively, a number of teachers argued that the real problem with popular culture is its relentless appeal to selfishness and materialism. “Clothing and sneakers make who you are”, commented one teacher. Another argued that “While the negative messages about government institutions and figures have some effect, I think teenagers’ focus on materialism and emotional pursuits do more to preclude their participation”. Some see the media as partly responsible for degrading educational achievement itself, glorifying rock, sports, and entertainment stars, not people

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who might provide models that inspire academic achievement. Stated one teacher, popular culture “looks down upon those who place a high value on education and morality”. Another noted that her inner-city students think that “It’s cool to be stupid”.

Thus, the negative effects of popular culture on students’ civic values and attitudes may be indirect. It encourages students to see themselves and their present idiosyncratic urges at the center of a universe governed by corrupt political leaders who make our political principles unworthy of their respect, and informed participation in our civic life unworthy of their effort.

#### **4. WHY BECOME INVOLVED**

Despite their mostly negative views about governmental and political institutions and figures, the members of the SSAC have chosen to become involved in political activity. Why? In order to answer this question, we asked the students to provide some details about their participation in the SSAC and in other civic activities.

Most of the students have been members of the SSAC for one or two years; two have been members for three years. When asked about their specific plans or goals in joining the organization, responses varied. A number of students commented that they hoped to take part in writing legislation, learn about education reform, or improve education in Massachusetts. Commenting more generally, several students expressed a desire to help put education decisions in the hands of students and teachers in Massachusetts rather than policy makers. Others mentioned making specific changes in their own schools, helping to shape state policy, and meeting people from other parts of the state.

Most of the students felt that their work with the SSAC had been productive, with only one respondent indicating that it hadn’t. When asked to cite the most important thing the SSAC had accomplished during their tenure, a majority of the students indicated writing legislation, particularly legislation seeking to abolish the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Other activities the students deemed important were producing an informational video about the SSAC and keeping their fellow students informed about education policy issues.

Students overwhelmingly cited “a belief that I can make a difference” as the primary influence on their decision to become involved with the SSAC. Other significant factors included previous positive experiences in civic activities and the influence of friends or peers. The desire to list the experience on a resume, however, also ranked fairly high. Course work and teachers and family were not rated highly as influences in joining the SSAC. However, another question asked them to rate from one to five their beliefs about the following statement: “I believe that individuals like myself can influence what our local, state, and federal governments do”. All of the respondents circled four (“agree somewhat”) or five (“strongly agree”). These responses indicate that the members of the SSAC have a fundamental belief in being involved and that they feel as though their civic work is valuable and productive. When further questioned about this in focused interviews, students cited family and school as the primary influences on this belief, indicating that these factors may have a more generalized effect on students’ willingness to become involved, even if they aren’t a specific motivating force. In other words, family and education appear to serve to instill in children and teenagers a pervasive sense of civic commitment, which then may make them more receptive to other influences and ultimately lead them to become involved in civic activities.

All of the students indicated that they participated in other school or community activities, suggesting a broader commitment to civic life than political activity alone. In addition, all of the students reported that they keep informed on current events, most commonly by reading a newspaper. The majority of the students regularly discuss political issues with teachers, parents, and classmates, though they are less likely to do so with friends. When asked to rank various areas of life in order of importance to them over the next ten years, intellectual/educational growth and community/political involvement ranked the highest. Students listed financial success as being the least important, while both family and professional life received mixed responses.

We were interested in the students' views on the value of a required course in government or civics and on the benefits of required community service as ways that might have promoted their own civic dispositions and values and as ways that might promote civic values among other teenagers. Most of the students we surveyed, it turned out, had taken a government or civics course in high school, though only three students indicated that it had been required. Most felt it should be a requirement:

"Yes. Part of the purpose of public education, if not its primary purpose, is to make students into model and productive members of society. This is impossible without proper knowledge of our government and how and why it functions".

"Yes, because the most important part of democracy is an educated constituency".

"Yes, I feel they should. I got a lot more out of it [government course] than my history courses, and it really helped prepare me to be an active and informed citizen".

"They should, and it should be honest. One cannot have a democracy without education about government. To send students into the voting world without a knowledge of government is to destroy democracy".

On the other hand, the students were more wary of required community service in schools. Only two indicated that it had been required of them in high school; one was required to perform 40 hours and the other 48 hours of community service over four years. The majority thought community service should not be required, though it could be strongly encouraged:

"Forced service is in direct opposition to the idea of volunteerism. I believe that schools should not interfere and try to control students' lives outside of the class, and I view forced service as unnecessary".

"The concept of requiring community service is nauseatingly cynical. That Americans will not help others without the threat of repercussions is horrendous to say the least. Those who are motivated to help should be encouraged to do so, but altruism cannot be forced, since forced altruism is not actually altruistic".

"It should be the choice of the student to help out. However, it should be encouraged".

Though most students disagreed with the concept of forced service, some students cited practical reasons for not requiring community service. Several noted that many students have jobs or other family obligations that leave them with little extra time to spend volunteering. Another student commented that it would simply be another requirement that might cause students to stay back or drop out. Students who responded that community service should be required seemed to feel that it stimulates a civic or volunteer attitude. As one student noted: "I think that the requirement spurs kids into action. I know that I might not have begun to do political volunteer work if I hadn't needed

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to meet the requirement. However, I ended up going well beyond that requirement...”

Interestingly, most of the teachers did favor required community service even though they also saw its limitations and inherent contradiction. Most teachers felt that it would be beneficial for students as long as it is “organized well” and “documented”. Four teachers were opposed or highly ambivalent, viewing it as a form of coercion or similar to punching a time clock in order to complete the requisite number of hours.

Two major themes emerged from the students’ responses on how greater participation in civic activity could be promoted among American youth, both in general and specifically through schools: 1) involve youths in civic activity at an early age; and 2) let youths know that they matter and that they will be listened to. Students felt very strongly that simply involving kids in civic activity at an early age would do much to foster civic awareness and behavior. “Let them know they matter – that we aren’t just American youth, but citizens that matter”. Or, “The biggest thing would be to treat students like they are full members of society. Often times, students are expected to learn about government and care about it, yet they are treated like spectators, and not participants. Civic activity amongst youth can be promoted by promoting youths and their impact on the governmental process”.

Respondents also had specific suggestions for schools, saying “Schools should have ‘government day’ in which students should be allowed to observe a governmental official to see what goes on in their local governments”. Or, “Allow kids to participate in student government at a younger age. Have student councils, classroom democracy and such. Allow all students to be involved because some kids get turned off to student government when they are not allowed to participate. Sometimes kids don’t get voted in because the elections are popularity contests. If the classroom could be run like a mock government and each student was given a responsibility, I think that they would see that even if they play a small role it’s still important”. Or, “Schools need to teach about government and history. They need to do so in an unbiased fashion. And they need to do so by showing the relevance to kids today... It is human nature to have no interest in things you don’t help create, and it is natural not to have much interest in something that seemingly has no relevance. Once kids are shown how they can take some control, they will...”

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam clearly summarizes the serious problem facing our country today: Philosophers from Aristotle and Rousseau to William James and John Dewey have begun discussions of civics with the education of youth. They have pondered the essential virtues and skills and knowledge and habits of democratic citizens and how to instill them. That starting point is especially appropriate for reformers today, for the single most important cause of our current plight is a pervasive and continuing generational decline in almost all forms of civic engagement. Today’s youth did not initiate the erosion of Americans’ social capital... and it is the obligation of Americans of all ages to help rekindle civic engagement among the generation that will come of age in the early years of the twenty-first century (Putnam, 404).

Our survey results corroborate what many scholars have suggested: some of this decline can be attributed to the damaging effects of the messages emanating from popular culture. However, its

negative effects on the development of strong civic values seem to stem less from their cynical messages about our political and governmental institutions and figures than from their messages urging immediate self-gratification and their appeal to raw emotion, messages that rarely foster physical, sexual, emotional, and intellectual self-discipline, intellectual aspirations, academic achievement, and informed participation in civic life (even when they are positive about our political principles and institutions). These messages, directed as they are to our students' ids and egos, not their minds or characters, would themselves not be as damaging as they now are if they did not take place in the context of increasingly dysfunctional or limited family life, where children see few if any civic role models. The students in our survey themselves see the importance of the family. As one student commented:

"I don't think that pop culture will or will not encourage youth from being civic minded. However, what will discourage (or not encourage) youth from being civic minded is if they are raised by pop culture. If a child goes without a parent or strong familiar role model, and if pop culture is their upbringing, proper values towards civicism will never be developed, and quite possibly norms that conflict with civic-mindedness will be adopted".

It is perhaps not surprising that most of the teachers in our survey view required community service favorably. It is a straw to grasp at in desperation in this context. These are teachers who want to foster a deep understanding of our Constitution and Bill of Rights, who are committed to authentic civic education. They are fully aware that responsible participation in the American experiment in democracy cannot take place in an intellectual vacuum. In the final analysis, the values promoted by our popular culture present a complex challenge to the development of healthy civic values, and it is not clear how this challenge can be addressed unless our families and our schools as formative social institutions are strengthened. ■

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