

# Engaged and Plugged In: Strengthening Civic Participation in America

BY AMERICA FERRERA



On November 6, 2012, just hours before the election results would begin to come in, a trip to a neighborhood bodega put me in a state of panic.

Two young women about my age were going about their shop-keeping routine when one asked the other her thoughts on that day's election. "Who cares," she replied. "Same old s\*\*\* either way."

The young woman's response wasn't shocking for its content—I've lived in New York City long enough to be unfazed by such passing expletives. No, what upset and disheartened me was that, with just minutes left before the polls closed, I didn't have enough time to change this young woman's mind. And that broke my heart.

Now that the 2012 election has come and gone—an election marked by the overwhelming turnout of young voters and voters of color—I believe the roots of civic participation in America are strong. Despite this, it is the future of civic participation—one having new branches that will reach out into new and uncertain places—that must be strengthened, and strengthened now.

Through my work with Voto Latino, I had a front-row seat to the most dynamic and engaged political class of young voters and voters of color that our country has ever enjoyed. And this year I've been blessed to work on "Chavez," a film that celebrates the life and works of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the many unnamed organizers who changed the course of civic participation in America. Wherever I went working with Voto Latino or filming, I met

people who were engaged and plugged in. I saw the America of my dreams playing out in real life.

As I traveled across the country with Voto Latino organizers, we met so many people who were taking brave steps to represent for themselves, for their friends, and for their family members who might not yet have a voice in our politics. Every conversation on a college campus, every media appearance with a local news outlet, we all brimmed with pride and optimism for the result we knew we would see: a record turnout on Election Day and proof that generations of organizing that focused on building the social infrastructure of participation had indeed borne fruit.

It was easy to get swept up in the excitement, but that isn't to say this work has been easy. To help affect record voter registration and turnout, groups like Voto Latino put everything they had into empowering our communities to claim their own voice and their own future, through civic participation and engagement.

We thought that 2012 would be a vindication of a strategy put in place long before us, delivering on a promise made by generations of policy and civic pioneers and organizers who had laid out the path we were now following. Our parents and families had done right by their future by investing not just in all of us, but by investing in a nation where we could build our own dreams and doggedly pursue them. And powered more than ever by social media platforms and digital connection technologies, we

expected young voters and voters of color to harness these networked bonds into a greater and more perfect participation.

At a time when the stakes for young people couldn't have been any higher, we saw record participation—but it was far from complete participation. Having been snapped back into reality by the conversation of those two young women in my neighborhood bodega, I realize now that we don't just need louder megaphones to get our messages out. We need



stronger messages—and more messengers—messages that reach deeper into our communities and spread the word that civic participation doesn't just mean action, it means results. And most of all, we need to honor our rich legacy of commitment and continue building the infrastructure to enable civic participation at all strata of American life.

As a society, we make these promises to young people: Your most basic needs are attainable; you will have a path to improve your life; and the world around you can be changed through your action and determination.

If any one of these promises is broken, we put our country's well-being at risk. And while as a nation we work to fully deliver on the important ideas and services that have been unequally distributed in our recent history—access to the Internet, strong public

education, affordable housing—we must also work to ensure that the infrastructure for civic participation reaches everywhere and everyone.

In the 2012 election I saw the efforts and sacrifices of previous generations bear fruit. But if we allow the broad disparity gap between communities to widen, how can we guarantee against future political apathy and disenfranchisement? If we don't fight for the infrastructure required to increase participation in the world around them, how can we expect our future generations—all of them—to get involved?

I'm more optimistic than ever that we—my generation—will keep this promise and preserve and build upon this rich infrastructure of civic participation. But my experience on Election Day will stay with me forever, and I'll never take our promise for granted again. ■

**CHAPTER TEN**

**Democratic  
Participation and  
Civic Leadership  
in a Diverse  
Nation**

**BY VANESSA CÁRDENAS**



Democratic participation—the active involvement of a diverse array of citizens contributing in meaningful ways to the decision-making process—is critical to our democracy. It is the fundamental principle on which our government is based, going back to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and it is the most cherished and long-lasting feature of our democracy. It is key for political representation and essential for transparency and accountability. It is also needed to advance an All-In policy agenda that ensures broadly shared prosperity.

While most people think only of voting when discussing democratic participation, it goes well beyond the ballot box. Volunteering, running for office, being informed about public issues, attending school and community meetings, and being active members of nongovernmental organizations are all important examples of participation. Americans not only strengthen our democracy by engaging with formal law making or policy development; participation in local and community structures is equally important to ensure that institutions are responsive to the people's needs.

Yet throughout our nation's history, the reality of democratic participation has not lived up to the ideal. Government institutions at every level have regularly erected barriers to the participation of certain groups of people. During the latter part of the 19th century and through a good portion of the 20th century, African Americans and poor people were kept from voting through a series of poll taxes,

literacy tests, and outright intimidation. Though not as egregious as in years past, voter barriers and disenfranchisement efforts still occur at unacceptable levels today. The 2012 elections saw an unprecedented wave of voter-suppression efforts across the nation in the form of stringent ID requirements, the dissemination of misleading information meant to confuse voters, and outright challenges of voter eligibility, just to name a few of the schemes and practices employed to discourage and undermine democratic participation. In addition to these barriers to voting, poor people and people of color have often been blocked from fully participating in society's democratic institutions due to other obstacles such as poverty, lack of information, racial discrimination, weak social networks, and lack of English-language proficiency.

Furthermore, earlier this year, the Supreme Court gutted Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act,<sup>1</sup> which required that certain states and localities with a history of discrimination submit all of their election laws to the Justice Department for approval. Section 4 was a vital tool to ensure the right to vote of all Americans, particularly people of color.

In spite of these barriers, communities of color are poised to reinvigorate our democracy and reaffirm the bedrock governing principles of our nation—a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. In the past two elections, these communities came together with women, youth, and other allies to elect and then re-elect the nation's first African American president. These voters of color were

driven largely by the need to defend a policy agenda that is more in line with their economic and social needs and by the excellent organizing of social-justice groups around key issues—such as immigrants’ rights, voting rights, and women’s rights. These movements have re-energized and reconnected people of color to the basic tenets of our democracy in profound ways.

### **Communities of color significantly increased their voting participation in 2012**

Despite the attacks on voting and efforts to disenfranchise voters, particularly in the 2012 presidential election, communities of color turned out in unprecedented numbers. In fact, blacks voted at a higher rate in 2012 than other groups, and for the first time in history voted at a higher rate than whites.<sup>2</sup> As for Hispanics, 12.5 million cast ballots in 2012<sup>3</sup>—a historic turnout by this community. And while Asian Americans comprised only 3 percent of voters in 2012, that number represents a 1 percentage point increase from 2008.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the number of Asian American voters increased by 128 percent since 1996.<sup>5</sup> Native Americans comprise about 1 percent of the electorate and have had a historically low turnout,<sup>6</sup> but massive efforts to turn out Native American voters in 2012 made their vote crucial in key Senate races. Sens. Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) and John Tester (D-MT), for example, both won by narrow margins by reaching out to and engaging with local Native American communities.<sup>7</sup>



While roughly 12.5 million Latinos voted in 2012, an estimated 2.5 million Latinos were registered to vote but did not cast a ballot, and an additional 8.6 million Latinos were eligible to register to vote (18 years old or older and U.S. citizens) but did not register. In other words, there are almost as many potential Latino voters (11.1 million) as there are actual Latino voters (12.2 million).

## There are even more voters of color waiting in the wings

Although the turnout of people of color in 2008 and 2012 was impressive, there are even more voters out there. In the case of Latinos, they are far from realizing their full voting potential. While roughly 12.2 million Latinos voted in 2012, an estimated 2.5 million Latinos were registered to vote but did not cast a ballot, and an additional 8.6 million Latinos were eligible to register to vote (18 years old or older and U.S. citizens) but did not register, according to analysis by the polling firm LatinoDecisions.<sup>8</sup> In other words, there are almost as many potential Latino voters (11.1 million) as there are actual Latino voters (12.2 million).

For their part, Asian Americans, the fastest-growing racial group in the United States, are poised to have a significant impact on the electorate as well. While their share of voters is relatively low—3 percent in 2012—the Asian American electorate has been steadily growing with each presidential election from 1.6 percent in 1996, 1.8 percent in 2000, 2.3 percent in 2004, to nearly 2.5 percent in 2008. In 2008 about 600,000 new Asian Americans entered the electorate.<sup>9</sup> Yet while in 2012 there was a significant increase in voter-mobilization efforts by community organizations, most Asian American voters (65 percent) report that they received no contact about the election.<sup>10</sup>

Looking at American Indians and Alaska Natives, only three out of five individuals in these two groups who are eligible to vote are registered to vote.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, turnout rates among registered American

Indians and Alaska Natives are between 5 percentage points to 14 percentage points lower than other racial and ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup>

## Immigrants ready to integrate, learn English, and naturalize

Another significant segment of the population ready to engage in America's civic life are immigrants. Immigrants have re-energized and reconnected their respective communities to the political process through their struggle for immigrants' rights and social inclusion. Examples abound: Immigrants are now organizing to raise the minimum wage in Florida; immigrant women in Virginia are coming together to advocate for better schools and facilities for their children; and across the country, immigrants in conjunction with already established communities are organizing to improve their housing conditions. All of these stories show us that immigrants are learning to navigate and manage structures of power in their adopted land to improve the lives of their families and communities. Meanwhile, as Congress considers legislation to provide undocumented immigrants a road map to citizenship, it should also consider ways to ensure that immigrants are better prepared to participate in our democracy.

English-language acquisition and citizenship are key to this process. Increased English proficiency is highly correlated with economic and social well-being. It can lead to increased income for immigrant wage earners, greater school readiness for their



Members of the mariachi band "Gallos de Jalisco" serenade California citizens to get out and cast their vote on Tuesday, Nov. 6, 2012 in the Sun Valley district of Los Angeles.

AP PHOTO/DAMIAN DOVARGANES

children, and improved intergenerational communications within their families, not to mention the ability to communicate with the broader community in which they live. By the same token, citizenship is an important milestone toward full political and economic membership. Immigrants, when naturalized not only gain the right to vote but also earn more than their noncitizen counterparts,<sup>13</sup> are less likely to be unemployed, and are better represented in highly skilled jobs. Immigrants also show a strong desire to become citizens. Surveys demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of the 8.5 million legal permanent residents who are eligible to naturalize would like to become citizens.<sup>14</sup>

### These growing communities are progressive and support an equity agenda

In the 2012 election voters of color overwhelmingly supported a progressive vision moving forward. Their mandate was clear: America needs a policy agenda to help restore the American Dream of social and economic mobility for all and support a progressive vision grounded in the notion that our economy should work for everyone, not just for the wealthy few.

People of color—Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans—overwhelmingly

support a policy agenda focused on key investments to grow and strengthen the middle class, a fair tax plan, affordable health care coverage, and ensuring outstanding public education for all. Their level of concern about the economy is not surprising given the challenges they face on both economic and social fronts. What made the 2012 election different and what it underscored is that the changing face of our nation makes it imperative to act on solutions to promote the economic well-being of all our citizens. It so happens that this equity policy agenda benefits all Americans.

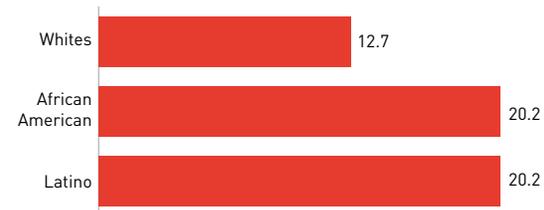
Communities of color are poised to reinvigorate our American democracy if we are able to capitalize on their growth and adopt strategies to maximize their involvement in civic life. These communities have an inclusive and positive vision of where our country should be moving toward that is fully consistent with the American values of working hard and playing by the rules. Yet this vision can only become a reality if the barriers to their civic participation are removed.

### **Barriers to democratic participation among underrepresented communities**

To harness the enormous potential of our communities of color, obstacles must be removed on the democratic participation front. Today these obstacles include barriers to voting, lack of representation, and lower levels of volunteerism.

**FIGURE 1**

### **Election Day waiting times by race/ethnicity (in minutes)**



Source: New York Times, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/02/05/us/politics/how-long-it-took-groups-to-vote.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/02/05/us/politics/how-long-it-took-groups-to-vote.html?_r=1&)

### **Voter suppression and disenfranchisement**

Currently states set their own electoral policies and procedures, which leads to confusing and sometimes contradictory policies and has created an electoral system of 13,000 voting districts spanning more than 3,000 counties in 50 states. This system produces inequalities across districts and in every person's ability to participate in the democratic process.<sup>15</sup>

The 2012 election was an extreme example of the barriers communities of color face as a result of this labyrinth of electoral policies. During that election Americans saw an unprecedented wave of voter suppression and disenfranchisement efforts in a significant number of states, efforts that included stringent ID requirements, misleading information, challenges of voter eligibility in communities of color, and longer wait lines for African American and Hispanic voters, among other obstacles to participation. These practices didn't end with the 2012 presidential contest. Since the beginning of 2013,

more than 80 laws to restrict voting have been introduced in 31 states.<sup>16</sup>

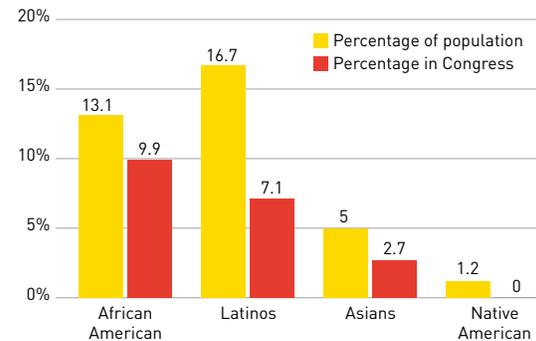
Moreover, among the most egregious forms of disenfranchisement is the shortsighted and punitive set of laws that the United States maintains—laws that deny people with felony convictions the ability to vote. According to a report by The Sentencing Project, by 2010 a record 5.85 million people were disenfranchised as a result of a felony conviction. In the states with the most draconian policies, including Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Virginia, more than 7 percent of the adult population is barred from the polls, sometimes for life. Nationally, nearly half of those affected have completed their sentences,<sup>17</sup> including those on parole or probation.

### Lack of representation in leadership positions

Another significant barrier that hinders participation is the absence of people of color at the decision-making table. When examining the makeup of the leadership in all areas of our government, including the courts system, the troubling reality is that although growing in population, people of color remain significantly under-represented. Case in point: Of the 535 voting members of the 113th Congress, 375—70 percent—are white men.<sup>18</sup> This lack of representation is particularly acute in the Latino community. While Hispanics account for about 15 percent of our nation's population, they hold only 1 percent of elected or appointed offices, according to

FIGURE 2

### Lack of political leadership at the national level among communities of color



Source: MSNBC

the U.S. Hispanic Leadership Institute.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, according to a 2008 analysis by the National Conference of State Legislatures, of the nation's 7,382 state lawmakers, only 245—3.3 percent—are Hispanic.

Another example of the leadership disparity is the racial and ethnic makeup of governors in the United States and of jurists on federal court benches. According to a 2012 report by National Urban Fellows, 92 percent of American governors are non-Hispanic white.<sup>20</sup> The same report cites the fact that while the total U.S. population includes 36 percent people of color, 90 percent of our federal judges are of white, non-Hispanic heritage.

The lack of diversity among judges is also profoundly problematic. The effective administration of justice and the legitimacy of the courts require judges who reflect the nation's diversity.

Yet according to the Brennan Center for Justice, white males are over-represented on state appellate benches by a margin of nearly 2-to-1. Almost every other demographic group is underrepresented when compared to their share of the nation's population, and there is also evidence that the number of black male judges is actually decreasing. Even Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito acknowledged the importance of having people in the bench who have diverse experiences:

*[W]hen a case comes before me involving, let's say, someone who is an immigrant—and we get an awful lot of immigration cases and naturalization cases—I can't help but think of my own ancestors, because it wasn't that long ago when they were in that position. ... When I get a case about discrimination, I have to think about people in my own family who suffered discrimination because of their ethnic*

*background or because of religion or because of gender. And I do take that into account.*<sup>21</sup>

By virtue of not having a seat at the table, the concerns and voices of communities of color are not represented in the decision-making processes in our nation. Numerous studies demonstrate that racial and ethnic diversity can result in very significant policy changes on behalf of people of color.<sup>22</sup> African American state legislators are more likely to introduce measures to combat racial discrimination as well as measures generally aimed at improving education, health care, and social well-being. Similarly, Latino legislators are key on issues related to immigration, language learning, and opportunities for immigrants. Women of color, in particular, are powerful agents of change.<sup>23</sup> When women of color assume powerful leadership positions, the prospects improve for legislation to expand access to programs that provide a path to opportunity for low-income

## Building capacity among leaders of color

Leadership-development programs are important for building the skills needed to reach across traditional boundaries. Urban Habitat's Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute<sup>24</sup> trains equity advocates in the San Francisco Bay Area to step into policy positions. The 80-hour, six-month-long program aims to build power by training diverse community leaders to effectively serve on the local and regional boards and commissions that set transportation, land-use, housing, jobs, and climate-change policies. When equity leaders come to the table, they not only bring important new expertise; they also begin to bridge the racial gap that exists between these institutions and the communities they represent.

Americans and increase benefit levels to those who need these programs the most.

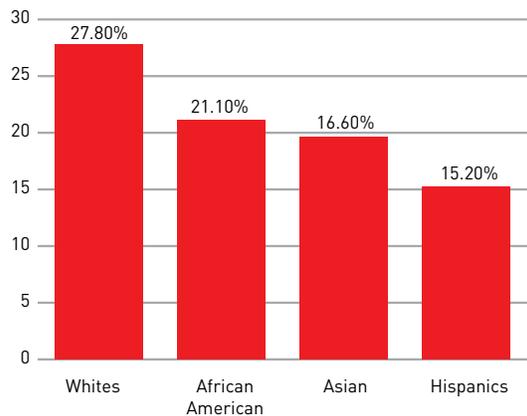
### Obstacles to engaging in community service and community development

Volunteerism and participating in the process of community development are also important forms of civic participation. By working together and talking to each other, Americans help solve problems and make communities better places to live and work. According to research conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service, people who volunteer are more likely to choose a career in public service that offers them an advantage in the job

market and increases their life-long involvement in civic affairs.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly true for people of color as volunteer opportunities and/or participation in national service give them needed skills and serve as stepping stones to good jobs that lead to the middle class. Yet communities of color have lower levels of volunteerism than whites.

In 2012 whites continued to volunteer at a higher rate (27.8 percent) than did African Americans (21.1 percent), Asians (19.6 percent), and Hispanics (15.2 percent). Of these groups, the volunteer rate for whites fell 0.4 percent in 2012, which was driven by a decline in the volunteer rate of white women. Among blacks, the rate of volunteerism edged up 0.8 percentage points during the same period.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Volunteerism in the United States by race, 2012**



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>

One reason for this racial disparity in volunteerism may be unequal access to youth-service programs for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It has been shown that many adults begin their tradition of volunteering as youth. But research documents that disadvantaged young people are less likely to have opportunities to serve others. According to an analysis by the Corporation for National and Community Service, only 43 percent of youth from disadvantaged circumstances volunteer, compared to 59 percent of other youth.<sup>26</sup> In addition, schools serving youth in disadvantaged circumstances are less likely to provide service-learning opportunities than schools in economically better off communities.<sup>27</sup> Only 29 percent of high-poverty schools offered service-learning opportunities in 2004, versus 36 percent of other schools, and only 26 percent of students in



California's Online Voter Registration program dramatically boosted voter rolls and also engaged low-propensity voters. Of the more than 800,000 Californians that used the new registration system, 23 percent were Hispanic, 11 percent Asian, and 60 percent white, reflecting the ethnic makeup of the state's electorate.

low-income schools participated in service activities, versus 32 percent of students in high-income schools.

A similar gap is evident in community-based organizations. Fully, 7 percent of youth from disadvantaged circumstances volunteer through a community-based youth program, compared to 12 percent of other youth. Another factor is that disadvantaged youth are less likely to be asked to serve than youth from other circumstances.<sup>28</sup>

### **Strategies to promote civic participation among communities of color**

Communities across the nation are devising innovative strategies to promote the civic engagement of communities of color. Investments in strategies and programs that lead to volunteerism and leadership development along with greater utilization of technology and media can play a key role in increasing the democratic participation of people of color. Here are several examples that can be scaled up to increase democratic participation.

#### **Using technology to increase democratic participation**

Technology is a powerful tool for community engagement at the local and national level, particularly for communities of color who use cell phones, mobile Internet access, and social media at higher rates than

## Increasing voter turnout in Native American communities

One strategy to increase turnout in the Native American community is promoting voter registration in the Indian Health Service. Staff of the Indian Health Service, or IHS, is predominantly American Indian or Alaska Native,<sup>34</sup> which avoids or eliminates any real or perceived cultural barriers. The reach of the IHS is broad: It provides services to 1.9 million American Indians and Alaska Natives, representing 566 tribes in 35 states.<sup>35</sup> In these communities, a trip to see a medical care professional could not only yield improved health, but also lead to increased participation in our nation's democracy.

whites.<sup>29</sup> Technology's power can be leveraged to encourage, facilitate, and increase citizen-centered dialogue, organizing, and action on a wide variety of issues. With more than 70 percent of Americans online,<sup>30</sup> virtual micro-communities are making it easier for people to create relationships with those that share similar interests, opinions, and backgrounds. Americans can now pick and choose their online destinations and the preferred format to communicate their opinions, whether through blogs, videos, podcasts, or tweets. Before the Internet, people came together physically to mobilize around issues; now, thanks to technology, they have the option of accessing information and organizing online.

Unfortunately, unequal access to the Internet affects civic engagement when groups are under-represented. According to the Federal Communications Commission, 24 percent of people with less than a high school degree and 40 percent of those households in America with incomes under \$20,000 are

less likely to adopt broadband.<sup>31</sup> While differences in Internet access have slowly narrowed between whites, blacks, and Hispanics, income and educational attainment still define who benefits from the latest technological advances.

Some states are beginning to use technology to make it easier to register to vote and get information about where, when, and how to cast a ballot. By way of illustration, California's Online Voter Registration program dramatically boosted voter rolls and also engaged low-propensity voters. Of the more than 800,000 Californians that used the new registration system, 23 percent were Hispanic, 11 percent Asian, and 60 percent white, reflecting the ethnic makeup of the state's electorate. Latinos as well as individuals under 35 years old were more likely to register online than other groups.<sup>32</sup>

Using technology to promote democratic participation goes well beyond voting. For example, the



AmeriCorps volunteers hand out cups of ice during a Food on the Move mobile lunch program for low income children Monday, July 18, 2011, in Dallas.

AP PHOTO/LM OTERO

Textizen model being implemented in some cities, which is helping bring the voices from a large cross section of communities to inform the decision-making process by asking policy questions in public places—billboards, advertisement on public transportation—and collecting feedback via text messages.<sup>33</sup>

### Engaging community members in service and place-based community-development efforts

Federal government programs that provide social services and help rebuild economically distressed communities rely upon community participation, and are important places for more robust participation of communities of color.

The AmeriCorps program has demonstrated that it is an effective strategy to promote the participation of young people of color in America's civic life. AmeriCorps alums are significantly more civically engaged and more likely to pursue public service careers in the government and the nonprofit sector than their counterparts. It even has a greater relative impact on the career choices of people of color and individuals from disadvantaged circumstances. People of color who participate in AmeriCorps at both the state and national level are significantly more likely to choose a career in public service—44 percent compared to 26 percent of white AmeriCorps alums.<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, Youth Corps—full-time programs funded by AmeriCorps that provide young people with a

combination of work experience and education within the framework of community service—has proven to be a promising strategy for disadvantaged youth's volunteer involvement, especially for African American males. According to a study sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service, African American males in Youth Corps were more likely to have voted in the last election, experienced more employment, had higher earnings, were more likely to have earned an associate's degree, and had higher educational aspirations.<sup>37</sup>

YouthBuild, a Youth Corps program funded by both the Department of Labor and AmeriCorps, has similarly strong outcomes for youth. Research done to evaluate the program for the Knight Foundation tells the story of the transformation of a substantial group of young people from disconnected youth to exemplary civic leaders. A significant number of YouthBuild alumni hold public office or are church leaders; more than one-third are professional educators or youth workers.<sup>38</sup> Given the lack of opportunities for civic engagement and leadership for disconnected youth, YouthBuild stands as a rare example of a program that helps poor and working-class young adults develop into active and engaged citizens.<sup>39</sup>

### An affirmative democratic-participation policy agenda

As we move rapidly toward a nation where the majority of people will be people of color, Congress and the administration can do more to ensure that an

infrastructure is in place to encourage civic involvement among future generations. This can be accomplished by pursuing the following policy innovations.

### Ensure the right to vote

Every American should have easy access to the ballot box and their vote should be counted regardless of whom they choose to vote for. The Center for American Progress has published a report with 11 ideas that allow state legislators to strengthen voting rights in their individual states such as online voter registration, requiring public schools to help register voters, expanding early voting, restoring voting rights to the formerly incarcerated, and enacting constitutional language affirming an equal right to vote, among others.<sup>40</sup> These ideas can go a long way in ensuring the suffrage of all voters in states. But ensuring this most basic of democratic rights can't be accomplished by states alone—Congress must act to protect Americans' right to vote, particularly in light of the Supreme Court's decision on the Voting Rights Act.

- Pass the Voter Empowerment Act of 2013 (H.R. 12): The Voter Empowerment Act seeks to modernize the American electoral system by providing improved access to the ballot, enhanced integrity in our voting systems, and greater accountability for the administration of our elections.<sup>41</sup> The bill also restores voting rights to people with criminal convictions in federal

elections, incorporating the provisions of the Democracy Restoration Act.<sup>42</sup>

- Congress must move swiftly to craft a new coverage formula for the Voting Rights Act.<sup>43</sup> Hours after the Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, six of the nine states that had been covered in their entirety under the law's "preclearance" formula took steps toward restricting voting. This is why Congress should move swiftly and decisively to work in a bipartisan fashion to come up with a new formula that determines which states and localities will be subject to preclearance requirements under the still-valid sections of the Voting Rights Act. Until Congress acts, states and local governments can now pass voter suppression laws that harm the voting rights of all Americans, especially people of color.

### Make it easier for immigrants to learn English and naturalize

As Congress debates immigration reform, it should remember that English acquisition and citizenship are key to social cohesion and civic participation. Several surveys by the National Council of La Raza,<sup>44</sup> the Pew Hispanic Center,<sup>45</sup> and the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration<sup>46</sup> have shown that lack of English proficiency and the cost of naturalization are key reasons why legal permanent residents do not pursue citizenship. To address these barriers to citizenship, the following policies should be implemented:

■ Address the needs of those with limited English skills as part of a Workforce Investment Act, or WIA, reauthorization. Title II of the WIA is the main federal funding source for English as a second language instruction for adults in the United States, and as such represents one of the most important immigrant-integration programs at the federal level.<sup>47</sup> WIA reauthorization should:

- Place limited-English-proficient, or LEP, individuals on the list of hard-to-serve populations. Although more than 18 million working-age Americans are less-than-proficient English speakers, only 4.9 percent of individuals served by WIA have limited English proficiency. Without explicit inclusion of those with limited English skills as a priority population, workforce investment boards have little incentive to reach out to and serve those in need of customized and time-intensive language instruction.
- Enforce and strengthen provisions to encourage workforce investment boards to contract with community-based organizations. Many workforce investment boards and one-stop career centers have found significantly improved results through contracts with community-based organizations, which can offer customized, accessible, and culturally and linguistically appropriate services to populations with barriers to employment. Many workforce investment boards, however, have

been reluctant to contract with community groups, leaving many Latino and other communities virtually ignored by their one-stop centers. Incentives to encourage the use of community-based organizations as service providers would ensure that more workforce investment boards offer services that reach underserved communities.

- Make naturalization more affordable. Becoming a U.S. citizen is expensive—currently it costs \$680 to file a citizenship application, not to mention all the fees that legal permanent residents have to pay on their way to becoming citizens. While it is not possible to point to a specific amount that would be affordable for all eligible immigrants, Congress should consider options such as reducing fees or basing fees on income so that legal permanent residents can afford to become U.S. citizens.

### Promote democratic participation in society and government

Given the research that shows the importance of providing volunteer and national service opportunities for youth to encourage democratic participation, Congress should do more to provide these types of opportunities by:

- Funding a CivicCorps program modeled after AmeriCorps. The CivicCorps program would recruit volunteers to work full time for about a

year, focusing their work on promoting citizenship and democratic participation. They would teach English, register voters, and build awareness of our democratic process. Like AmeriCorps, CivicCorps would work with public and private organizations, including nonprofits and schools, in the communities it serves.

- Creating an innovation fund to promote democratic participation. Innovation funds can play a critical role in helping government invest in evidence-based programs that promote democratic participation by identifying promising programs that are working at the local level and funding their scale and spread, if appropriate. Presidential Innovation Fellows, or PIF, should work to develop ideas and ways to foster citizen engagement in key aspects of government agencies.
- Supporting funding for school- and community-based service programs for youth. Target schools and community organizations that serve disadvantaged youth. In 2011 Congress defunded Learn and Serve America, the only federal program targeted at service learning.
- Funding the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act to expand AmeriCorps. Although the act, which passed in 2009, called for AmeriCorps to expand to 250,000 positions by 2017, to date, only 80,000 positions have been funded.
- Increasing the use of national service as a strategy by federal agencies other than the

Corporation for National and Community Service. In recent years the Federal Emergency Management Administration, the Department of Education, and the National Guard have directed funding to AmeriCorps to address specific agency goals. National service offers a cost-effective strategy for these agencies and could be a valuable tool for other agencies as well.

- Funding YouthBuild to enable this effective program to go to scale. YouthBuild has demonstrated the positive impact it has on helping steer young people toward national service and good jobs, and the solid return on these investments. As such, it should receive increased funding to serve more young people of color.
- Launching a 21st Century Conservation Service Corps. Following the example of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, lawmakers under provisions of the WIA should establish a similar program that will work through public-private and nonprofit partnerships to engage citizens in hands-on service and job-training experiences on public lands, waterways, cultural heritage sites, and community green spaces.

### Use technology to innovate democratic participation

Technology is opening up exciting possibilities to promote civic participation among all Americans.



Alabama 7th District Democratic congressional candidate Terri Sewell campaigns outside historic Legion Field in Birmingham, Ala., Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2010.

AP PHOTO/DAVE MARTIN

Congress and the administration should implement the following actions to promote innovation in technology and civic participation:

- Accelerate access to high-speed broadband for underrepresented groups. Given that the online world is becoming the central destination for sharing, exchanging, and formulating opinions on issues to improve the nation, all people need to be involved in the conversation. Yet people living in rural areas and people of color have lower Internet adoption rates and lower rates of access.
- Accelerating the adoption of social media technologies by agencies. Agencies should view social media as central to their missions and take advantage of the possibilities it offers to communicate and engage with our citizenry. Some agencies and the White House are doing this already. An example of an innovative way to use technology is the White House Council on Women and Girls' Equal Futures App Challenge to create an app that promotes civic education and/or inspires girls to serve as leaders in our democracy.<sup>48</sup>

## Increase public policy capacity and promote diverse leadership

Today, there are a limited number of programs that effectively build public capacity among people of color. Given the lack of representation in decision-making bodies at the local and national level, more needs to be done to foster public service leaders who are representative of the next America. Policy-makers at the federal level should:

- Dedicate federal funding for public policy training and leadership-development programs targeting low-income communities and communities of color. Using the White House Fellows as a model,<sup>49</sup> Congress should work with the administration to fund public policy training programs throughout key agencies to cultivate leaders who understand the challenges of national government and are committed to leadership in their communities.
- Promote diverse representation and leadership in federally funded place-based programs. Individuals from low-income backgrounds or communities of color are under-represented among those elected or hired to work for local and regional decision-making bodies. This disconnect often results in infrastructure-investment plans that fail to meet the needs of these populations.<sup>50</sup> Federal policy can help ensure more representation and engagement by requiring the participation of under-represented groups in implementing federally

funded community-development efforts. One federal grant program, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Sustainable Communities Initiative, has an innovative two-pronged approach for addressing this challenge. First, would-be grantees are required to describe how they will engage traditionally marginalized communities, including limited-English-proficient populations. Second, grantees are required to set aside 10 percent of their project budget for community-engagement activities and to develop a plan on how they will engage communities of color in their planning and decision-making processes.

## Conclusion

Democratic participation is at the core of our democracy. The voices, inputs, insights, and talents of all Americans are needed to make decisions about the quality of our lives, how communities function, the allocation of resources, and who gets to represent America's citizenry at all levels of government. As communities of color continue to grow, the need to have their voices and their presence at the decision-making table is an imperative we can no longer ignore or postpone. By implementing strategies that educate all Americans about their rights and responsibilities, that make it easier to vote, and that promote volunteerism and national service, our democratic process will be strengthened and our democracy will remain true to its tenets of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. ■



Aida Castillo places a sticker on her blouse indicating that she had voted during the early voting period, Saturday, Oct. 20, 2012, in Las Vegas.

AP PHOTO/JULIE JACOBSON

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## QUICK VIEW

# Democratic Participation and Leadership in a Diverse Nation

**C**ommunities of color are already playing an increasingly important role in shaping the future of the United States. In the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, people of color turned out in unprecedented numbers, significantly altering the electoral map. Yet communities of color still face several barriers to participation: voter suppression and disenfranchisement, political leadership that is inconsistent with our nation's

diversity, and unequal access to service and volunteer opportunities. There are a number of strategies being employed to overcome these barriers, including the use of technology, national service programs, and encouraging the integration of immigrants. It is critical that we promote the democratic participation of communities of color so that they are adequately represented in community and government institutions. ■

## Facts at a glance

- **12.2 million:** The record number of Latinos who voted in the 2012 election, although there were nearly as many potential Latino voters (11.1 million) who did not cast a ballot<sup>1</sup>
- **69 percent:** The share of Asian Americans who reported receiving no contact about the 2012 election, despite the fact that Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial group<sup>2</sup>
- **1 percent:** The share of Hispanics holding elected or appointed office in the United States of the 535 voting members of the 113th Congress, 359 are white non-Hispanic men. Of the nation's 50 governors, 92 percent are white. And 90 percent of the federal bench is white non-Hispanic<sup>3</sup>
- **20 percent:** How much more likely AmeriCorps alumni of color are than white alumni to be employed in the public service field<sup>4</sup>

## Call to action

This chapter presents six policy priorities as steps that can be taken today to promote democratic participation to communities who will soon comprise the majority. To this end, Congress and the administration should work together to take the following actions:

- **Congress must move swiftly to craft a new Section 4 for the Voting Rights Act.** Congress should move swiftly and decisively to work in a bipartisan fashion to come up with a new formula that determines which states and localities will be subject to preclearance requirements under the still-valid sections of the Voting Rights Act
- **Ensure the right to vote for all.** Enact the Voter Empowerment Act of 2013 to improve accountability and access to the ballot
- **Make it easier for immigrants to naturalize and integrate.** Increase funding for English as a second language, or ESL, and citizenship classes and lower citizenship fees
- **Provide more opportunities for national service and volunteerism.** As an important first step, fully fund the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act to create 250,000 new AmeriCorps positions
- **Develop a CivicCorps program to specifically address democratic participation.**
- **Expand access to technology and leverage it for increased civic participation.** Accelerate access to high-speed broadband for under-represented groups and encourage partnerships between policymakers and web developers to empower and engage communities of color
- **Expand public policy capacity at the local level.** Increase funding for public policy training and leadership-development programs.
- **Incentivize civic participation in regional planning efforts.** Dedicate 10 percent of federal regional planning grants for community-engagement activities

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