



Civic Engagement

Issue Brief



The Community Input Project

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is committed to the best ideas and most effective solutions—at the local and the regional levels. With those goals in mind, the community foundation has initiated the Community Input Project, a series of strategic conversations around needs and issues that matter most. The issues were selected based on a review of local data, the many excellent assessments available about the health, social and environmental concerns in the region, and issues community members and leaders have raised.

The community foundation anticipates this process will spur a greater interest in regional partnerships as well as strategic solutions for meaningful, lasting and transformative change. The community foundation's board of directors will take the results of the community input process into consideration when making decisions about future directions and strategies.

This brief represents a summary of important trends and issues related to civic engagement. Similar briefs will be available in the areas of immigration, arts and culture, environment, community economic development, housing, civic engagement, child and youth development and education.

For purposes of this brief, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation has adopted the definition of civic engagement offered by the American Democracy Project (ADP). According to the ADP definition, civic engagement means working together to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. It can take many forms—from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. One of the challenges to civic engagement in the region is that civic and social connections are heavily influenced by income and class. Civic engagement, within this context, will require different strategies and social networks to effectively address pressing regional issues. The extent to which contemporary information and communication technologies can support civic engagement within and among groups is worth further exploration.

Major Trends

Eroding Social Capital. Over the last 30 years, the United States has seen a steady decline in civic engagement. Research has shown powerful links between this decline and the decline in social capital—the norms, networks and trust that enable individuals to work together in the pursuit of shared goals. Today, residents are making fewer connections with family, friends, community groups and congregations. Fewer social connections are both a symptom of declining social capital and a cause of it. As people become more isolated, their social networks erode and they are in turn less inclined to join with others for the common good (1, 2).

Lack of Political Participation. The most familiar example of civic decline is residents' growing refusal to go to the polls. Democracy requires active, connected and engaged participants. Without this, only a small group of people, often in the position of power and privilege, address the problems that are of concern to everyone: affordable housing, transportation, the quality of education, growing income disparities and neighborhood revitalization. Those with lower incomes, people of color and immigrants tend to participate less than other segments of society. But without a voice in the policies that affect them, these groups will continue to live with the social problems that plague their communities (3, 4).

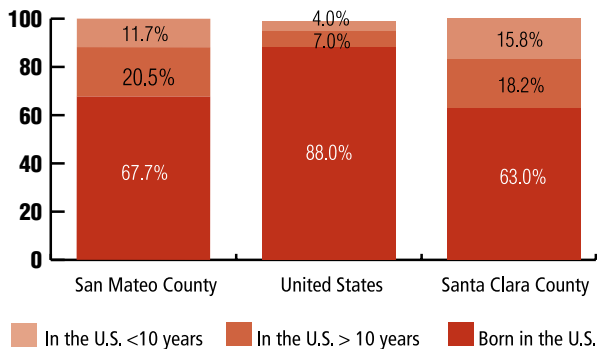
Changing Demographics. More than one in four Californians is foreign-born and in Silicon Valley two out of three individuals are immigrants or children of immigrants. While immigrants represent a sizable portion of the population, their participation in local government is often limited due to a variety of factors, including ineligibility to vote or not exercising their vote (if they are citizens), language barriers or coming from societies in which active participation is unwelcome or where authorities may be repressive. However, it is often at the local level where issues of most consequence to immigrants—policing, housing and local service provision—are discussed and policies created (5).

Increasing Youth Volunteerism. Despite the generally dismal picture of declining civic engagement, there are some hopeful signs. One of these is an increase in volunteerism, especially among youth. In 2002, 72 percent of 12th graders nationwide were volunteering compared with only 62 percent in 1989. This is particularly important since research repeatedly shows that the civic experiences of adolescents shape engagement in adulthood (6).

Regional Indicators

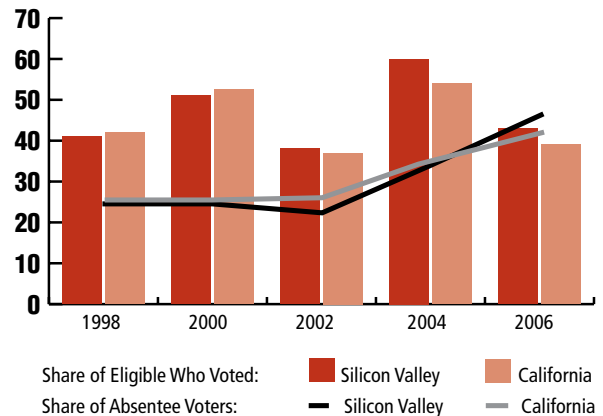
- The region is becoming increasingly more diverse in character than the rest of California or the United States (7). *See Figure 1*
- While average household income in Silicon Valley was 28 percent higher than nationwide, charitable giving per household was 12 percent lower (2 percent of income locally compared to nearly 3 percent nationally) (8, 9).
- Silicon Valley voter turnout increased 5 percent over-all since the previous mid-term election in 2002 (10). *See Figure 2*
- Voter participation rates vary by ethnicity with Hispanic-Americans voting less often than Asian-Americans and Whites (11).
- San Jose ranked 32nd among 50 major metropolitan areas in terms of its average volunteer rates between 2004 and 2006 (12). *See Figure 3*
- Silicon Valley residents were much less likely to volunteer in a place of worship, for a health or disease cause, to help the poor or elderly, or to assist in a neighborhood or civic group than residents in similar communities (11).
- Hispanic-Americans experience significantly lower levels of trust for neighbors, for people they work with and for local police. They also are less inclined to express high interest in politics or national affairs or to feel that people running the community care about them (11). *See Figure 4*

Figure 1: Percentage of Foreign Born Population, 2000



U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3).

Figure 2: Share of Eligible Voters Who Voted in November General Elections



Source: 2007 Silicon Valley Index. Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network.

Figure 3: Volunteer Rates by Metropolitan Area, 2004-2006



Source: Volunteering in America, 2007 City Trends and Rankings. Corporation for National and Community Service.

Figure 4: Percentage of Individuals Indicating Levels of Trust and Community Involvement by Ethnicity, 2000

	Asian-American	White	Hispanic American
Trust			
People can be trusted	52%	59%	33%
Trust neighbors	35%	56%	23%
Trust co-workers	34%	50%	28%
Trust local police	47%	61%	41%
Community involvement (is likely to)			
Serve on a community project	26%	37%	27%
Neighborhood association or crime watch	19%	25%	11%
Charity/social welfare organization	21%	32%	19%
Officer, committee member	11%	21%	8%
Community events attended within 1 year	4%	6.8%	4.8%
Barriers to involvement			
Safety	46%	20%	52%
Information (knowing how to get involved)	28%	16%	52%
People running community don't care about them	39%	30%	44%
Interest in politics/national affairs	18%	37%	23%

Source: Building Community. Social Connections and Civic Involvement in Silicon Valley. Peninsula Community Foundation, Community Foundation Silicon Valley, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Issues for Discussion

Volunteering, Voting and Giving

Voting, giving, volunteering and joining civic and community organizations are the basic elements of civic engagement. They give people a voice in politics, connect them to their community, allow them to “give back,” provide important resources for nonprofits and in general help bring people together.

Volunteering. Silicon Valley has lower rates of volunteerism than other comparable areas in the country. Volunteering is especially difficult for those with long work hours and commute times, lower income and lower education levels. One option to increase volunteerism for lower-income individuals is to offer volunteer opportunities as training for those who need to find or upgrade a job. Corporate philanthropy programs are also emerging, providing employees with multiple opportunities to volunteer their time. These programs are especially promising in that they facilitate volunteering during work time and bring professional and civic life more closely together (12).

Voting. Voter engagement peaks the interest of funders and organizations during election cycles and not necessarily in between. Thus strategies to enhance voter engagement are often sporadic in nature. However, an evaluation of several successful voter engagement efforts in the 2004 cycle revealed that these efforts should be integrated into ongoing policy or issue-based work. At the same time, efforts to increase voter engagement among constituent groups, particularly those from disenfranchised communities, have a positive effect on that group's ability to engage in the political process and advance community interests. Elected officials are also more responsive to constituencies that vote. In this way, voter engagement and more sustained forms of civic engagement can reinforce one another (13).

Giving. Strategies to increase giving often focus on high net worth individuals, but in fact middle and lower-income donors give a higher percentage of their income to charitable causes. Therefore, giving should be measured not just in terms of dollars in the system, but the extent to which donor engagement strategies reach a diverse range of people, helping them learn about community issues and collaborate with others in directing their charitable gifts. Private sector firms have also emerged as institutions that facilitate giving and many are offering to match the charitable donations of their employees, both nationally and in Silicon Valley (14, 15).

Community and Political Engagement

Many Americans are only barely engaged in the public sphere and lack or do not exercise their voice in the policies that affect their families, communities and nation. Among those with financial struggles, a sense of powerlessness is common: it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as ordinary people continue to turn away from public life while leaving policy-making to others. What is called for is a revitalization of “deliberative democracy,” the deeper forms of civic engagement in which people join together to define the common good and implement strategies to achieve it.

Bridging social capital. Political and community engagement involve individuals coming together around shared interests. Yet a 2000 study of the region's civic health found that while relationships with fellow residents cut across racial and cultural lines, they were less likely to cut across social class or income levels. While real income for those in the top fifth has grown substantially over the last ten years, it has declined for those in the bottom fifth. The rarity of connecting across classes presents a challenge to civic engagement, especially when addressing issues that transcend socioeconomic distinctions. The challenge is to determine how best to develop networks that cross boundaries and build bridges to a better life for those who have less access to resources (11).

Facilitating engagement. An important philosophy underlying many community and political engagement strategies is that residents are in the best position to lead community change. Yet many have acknowledged the inherent difficulties in ensuring that community involvement happens and that it happens in meaningful, authentic ways. Lessons from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation-funded Neighborhood Improvement Initiative indicate the importance of the following: treating the community as an equal partner; not rushing the engagement process; letting residents drive the change process while providing guidance along the way and building trust (17).

Community organizing. Slowing the steady decline in civic engagement may seem hopeless, but the long tradition of community organizing demonstrates that it is a highly effective approach to empowering residents to come together with one another, to deliberate and solve common problems. Community organizing (according to the Saul Alinsky model) is designed to rectify a fundamental power imbalance—it is the process by which traditionally marginalized communities come together to act in the interest of their common good and social justice. In doing so, they build true democracy. They develop their civic capacities and a sense of being in community together and organize themselves to set their own agenda. These communities can begin to form organized constituencies that have a voice and contribute to policy development and change (18).

Civic Engagement for Youth

The fact that youth volunteering is on the rise is a hopeful sign for the future of civic engagement. A growing body of research indicates the extent to which youth have meaningful opportunities to participate in the community is a critical determinant of healthy development. There are many strategies that schools and nonprofits have used to encourage volunteering among youth and also to encourage deeper forms of civic engagement.

Volunteerism. While there has been an overall increase in high-school youth volunteerism, youth from low-income families are less likely to have volunteer opportunities through service-learning programs, school clubs and civic organizations. To close this gap, nonprofits are turning to schools and churches to reach out to young people living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Teachers play a particularly important role in motivating youth to volunteer.

Political Engagement. As with adults, deeper forms of civic engagement among youth are important. Several local efforts aimed at increasing youth engagement in the political sphere are emerging. For example, Youth United for Community Action (YUCA), a youth-led organization in East Palo Alto (EPA), trained a cadre of youth to raise awareness of the harm done to health of local residents by a recycling plant in the city limits. The plant was ordered to close its doors this year. Organizations like YUCA can help youth inculcate the habit of coming together with others to solve community problems.

“The kids see the tangible results of their actions,” former EPA mayor Sharifa Wilson said. “That’s what gets people engaged in their community. It’s like democracy in action” (19).

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About Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is a leading voice and catalyst for innovative solutions to the region's most challenging problems. Our mission, vision and values reflect our commitment to serving the vibrant communities in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. We bring together diverse groups of people—nonprofits, donors, government leaders, business people, faith-based organizations—all of whom care deeply about improving the quality of life in our region. Our goal is impact and we employ a variety of strategies to achieve it, including grantmaking, community initiatives, donor engagement, convening and research.

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