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# Opportunities and Challenges for Youth Civic Engagement

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Key Findings

Youth civic engagement (YCE) is an important component of building pathways to opportunity for young people and is also a critical dimension of efforts to build healthy and vital communities and regions. There is a great variation in the degree, kind of, access to, and engagement in YCE within and across the Capital Region. In general, YCE experiences that youth feel are “genuine” and non-tokenistic, that offer young people meaningful levels of authority and incorporate them throughout a given process or institution, are assessed as more transformative for both youth and adults.

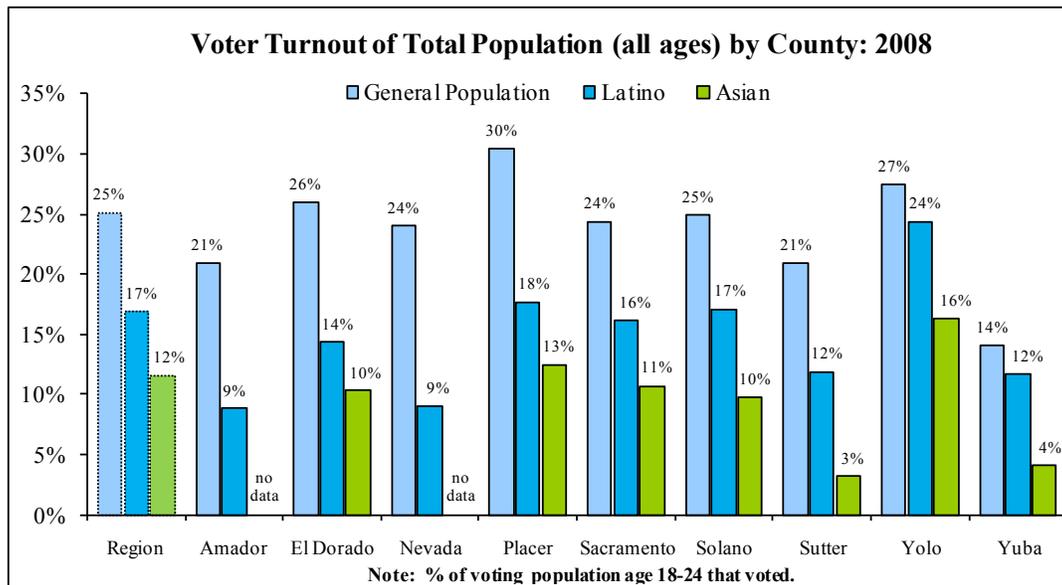
Drawing from a range of data sources, including voting records, youth surveys, qualitative interviews, and participatory youth research; we have found that YCE in the region (as elsewhere) can be categorized in the following general typology:

- Formal political participation (voting, electoral activity, policy advocacy)
- Participation in civic/community organizations, clubs, boards
- Everyday civic engagement (helping in extended family, peers, neighborhood)

### *Voting as key formal YCE opportunity*

Formal conceptions of civic engagement, such as voting behavior (including registration and turn-out), are important venues for youth political activity but are opportunities taken up unevenly by young people in the region. Three key points emerge:

1. Contrary to some popular portrayals, many young adults are engaged in the political process through voting.
2. Voting patterns are uneven by population and place.
3. Traditional predictors of the Latino and Asian youth vote may not hold for communities in the Capital Region.



*Informal modes of youth civic engagement*

In addition to the formal venue of voting, young people engage in efforts to improve their communities through a variety of formal and informal means. Informal modes of youth civic engagement, such as serving as a support for extended family, peer, and neighborhood members, are key venues for expression of civic identity and represent important community and regional assets. Research on YCE through Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions has shown both the variety of this engagement and the uneven patterns by place and population.

*Enhanced opportunities for contributing to meaningful change in their communities that include a broader range of youth are needed.*

Youth surveyed in communities throughout the region report making significant contributions to family life, but also face common challenges. As a whole these youth share patterns of low engagement in volunteer activities outside the family with only about half in the region engaging in some form of external civic leadership.

Table A: Regional Youth Reporting Regular Participation in Civic Life (REACH survey)

Activity	% High Involvement
Helping family	88%
Leadership beyond family	56%
Volunteering outside family	25%

However, youth and adults both seek a greater extent of YCE. For example, in youth media associated with the participatory element of Healthy Youth/Healthy Regions, young people express clear visions of themselves as civic actors and make demands for a greater role in shaping public policy; interviewed adult allies and organizational leaders agree.

## Implications for Action

These recommendations are intended to help young people and adult allies to increase the level of youth civic engagement and to unleash the transformative potential of youth leaders in improving their own lives, their communities, and the broader region.

*For youth:* Build capacity in the techniques of leadership and self-empowerment, including critical analysis of social and political structures, strategic communications, and community organizing.

*For adults,* Build capacity to better partner with and support youth leaders within one's organization and community. Relevant capacities include genuine and respectful listening to youth perspectives and demands, and continued critical reflection on how to open the circle of engagement to the most marginalized young people.

*At the organizational scale,* Identify the structures that impede meaningful and effective youth participation in decisions that affect their well-being, skill-building opportunities for young people, and developing opportunities for youth leadership.

*For institutions,* Increasing youth civic engagement can be catalyzed by inventorying the existing opportunity structures for youth leadership and identifying the leverage points (including a focus on marginalized youth) to increase access and effectiveness of youth voice.