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Volunteerism and Voting Not Enough to Nurture Democracy

November 05, 2000 | By Joseph Kahne

APATHY ABOUT next week's election raises a troubling red flag that the democratic process is suffering. In 1996, less than half of the voting age population went to the polls -- the lowest turnout since 1924. Voter turnout on Tuesday may be even lower.

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But getting people into the booths to vote for their personal priorities is not the solution. While voting can be a powerful tool, it won't get the whole job done.

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Democracy requires that we take responsibility for the life of our community. We must consider the needs and goals of our neighbors, discuss and come to understand our differences, develop common goals and engage in communitywide efforts to pursue shared priorities.

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Several studies show that civic participation is declining along with voting rates. Our current forums for civic discussion, from legislative sessions to television talk shows, are fractious environments without meaningful debate or signs of broad concern, and the result is citizen disengagement. The alienation of young people from the political process is particularly alarming: only 32 percent of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds voted in the 1996 presidential election. While many young people may "just say no" when it comes to politics, they do care about making a difference. Volunteerism is on the rise; according to a UCLA study of 261,000 college freshmen, 75 percent reported performing volunteer work as high school seniors.

A recent study by the National Association of Secretaries of State, found that 94 percent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 believe that "the most important thing I can do as a citizen is to help others." But is it? Volunteerism will always be an important societal support. However, like voting, it is not enough. Only through educated, collective civic action can we address the fundamental challenges we face.

Volunteer activity may provide temporary relief for a homeless or hungry individual, and it may raise the volunteer's self-esteem, but it doesn't change social policy and it fails to get to the root of the problem. In fact, if our focus on volunteerism distracts attention from solutions to societal problems, it can diminish our youths' understanding of what it means to fully participate as a citizen.

At Mills College's Institute for Civic Leadership, 15 undergraduate women (half from Mills and half from other colleges nationwide) enroll each fall in an intensive junior semester combining a high-powered internship with coursework designed to develop their civic leadership abilities. Students may work with a coalition of churches on affordable housing, or with local legislators to stop elder abuse in nursing homes, for example.

Mills views the "gender gap" far beyond the tendency of men and women to vote for different candidates. We are concerned that the vast majority of candidates and leaders of major social and civic institutions are men, despite the fact that women participate at far greater rates in the civic life of their communities and are the backbone of most community organizations.

Democracy cannot work by remote control. If we truly want to get tomorrow's leaders engaged, we must work with them in systematic and conscious ways to ensure that they become capable, concerned, and active citizens.

Joseph Kahne is associate professor of education and director of the Institute for Civic Leadership at Mills College in Oakland.

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