TO: Interested Parties

FROM: David Metz and Lucia Del Puppo
Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates

RE: Central and Southern California Youth and Their Engagement with Public Life and Their Communities

DATE: February 2016

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3), in partnership with the California Endowment, recently completed ground-breaking research on the attitudes of California youth toward community engagement. The research focused on uplifting the voices of young people whose voices are not often part of the public debate – youth between the ages of 15 and 26 in 19 counties throughout central and southern California. The research included a survey of over 1,000 youth who were interviewed on-line – on computers, tablets, and mobile devices – and was supplemented with focus groups in Los Angeles and Fresno and in-depth, qualitative online interviews that focused on the views of Latino, African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, LGBT, and undocumented youth.

In contrast to assumptions that California youth are cynical, disengaged or tuned out from the life of the community, our research results paint a different picture: they show that California youth are passionately concerned about a wide range of civic issues, particularly racism and inequality, and are actively interested in finding a way to make positive change in their communities. There are certainly barriers to engagement – a lack of information about ways to get involved, dismay with the current political discourse, or a feeling that their ideas or contributions will not be welcomed. But at the same time, youth also identify a number of factors that will make them more likely to engage – including the opportunity to work closely with their peers and to see that their efforts have made a difference in the community around them.

As California enters an election year, with many critical races for public office and ballot initiatives coming before the voters, the state’s youth face an enormously important
opportunity to make their voices heard. This brief memo looks to the research to answer some of the key questions about the role California’s young people can play in working for change at this critical moment in the state’s history.

**What do California’s youth care about?**

- **Youth are very concerned with intolerance and view it as the biggest social justice problem facing our society.** When prompted to share their biggest social justice concern, a clear 37-percent plurality pointed to intolerance, racism, homophobia, and religious discrimination as their top concern. Thirteen percent identified economic conditions and unemployment, eight percent said entitlement and laziness, six percent pointed to equality, and five percent cited education.

- **Lowering the cost of college tuition and ensuring access to clean drinking water were the most important objectives with which youth reported they’d be likely to engage.** Respondents were asked to rate their level of interest in personally engaging in a series of positive goals for change. Among the top items that interested them were the following:

  ✓ Lowering the cost of college tuition (83% extremely/very interested)
  ✓ Making sure everyone has clean drinking water (82%)
  ✓ Making sure everyone is able to see a doctor and get medical care (79%)
  ✓ Creating more job opportunities for youth (78%)
  ✓ Making it easier to get help with mental health issues (76%)

**How interested are youth in making a difference?**

- **Youth express a great degree of interest in making a difference.** When asked to rate their interest in getting involved to make a difference on a scale of zero (“no interest at all”) to 100 (“extremely interested”), the mean level of interest was 79.9 (as illustrated on the following page in Figure 1). While those who identified as already involved with community issues are most likely to express an interest in future involvement, even those who are “rarely” or “never” involved today also had a high degree of interest in future engagement, with a mean score of 68.7.
**How important is an online community to California youth?**

- **Use of technology is a key element of young Californians’ identity.** Nearly two-thirds of California youth (65%) say they are online “most of the day,” with nearly all (93%) reporting that they are online at least once a day. Their use of smartphones is almost universal (97% of survey respondents have). When asked to use a few words to describe the general character of their generation, the most frequent positive responses offered by California youth focused on their “tech-savvy” nature.

  Nearly half said that they would be “very interested” in working for change with people in their online community. In fact, youth rated this bond with their online community as more powerful than their bond with those who share their religion or their political beliefs.

**What do youth see as the best way to have an impact?**

- **California youth are active members of their online community, and believe that online action can help to make a difference.** Consider the following trends and perceptions related in California youths’ online involvement:

  - When asked which ways they have been involved to try to make a difference, 64 percent reported that they have shared or clicked “like” on something online that reflects their views.
  - When asked where they would be interested in working for positive change, schools and not-for-profit organizations were most often mentioned – but right behind them were online groups/social media.
✓ Most said sharing/liking something online (55%) or sending an email to a public figure (60%) has an impact on making positive change, and more than six in ten youth (61%) believe signing an online petition has an impact.
✓ When asked what might make them more interested in participating in any issue, 69 percent of youth said seeing other people doing it on social media.

• **At the same time, youth see a key role for direct action to create change.** Despite the critical importance of their online community, 61 percent pointed to direct action as the most effective way of making an impact. Young Californians appear to view online engagement and activity as an important complement – but not a replacement – for in-person engagement. In fact, as many as 61 percent said they had volunteered time for an organization active in community change.

**What motivates youth to get involved?**

• **Youth are more likely to get involved in issues they care about and that affect them.** Connecting the issue area to the effect on their lives is critical to youth. In fact, nearly all respondents (96%) said they would be more interested in being involved if an issue affected them personally, 95 percent said they’d be more interested if the issue is one they care about and 90 percent said they’d be interested if they knew it would help them get into college or get a job (as shown on the following page in Figure 2).

**Figure 2**
Factors Most Likely to Create More Interest Among Youth in Creating Positive Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s an issue that personally affects me and/or those I care about</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td></td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is an issue that I care about</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know that my involvement will make a difference</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me get into college, or get a job</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe my voice will make a difference</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Youth stress the importance of having fun – and acknowledge they are more likely to work for positive change if doing so is enjoyable. Eight in ten (81%) said they would be “more interested” in participating in an activity if it meant they got to hang out with other people their age, and 85 percent said they would be more interested if they wanted to be part of the group doing the activity. Youth respondents said they were more interested in engaging with other youth their age because they were more likely to see eye-to-eye, share goals for the future, and have fun working in collaboration. But many also saw benefits in working with adults – saying they were more likely to be mature, organized and effective in efforts to bring about social change.

• Young Californians want to know that investing their time and energy in action will make a positive difference. Youth who had engaged in efforts to make change said that seeing even a small impact made their participation more rewarding; 93 percent said that knowing that their involvement made a difference made them more interested in getting involved.

Why don’t more youth engage?

• Feeling respected is critical to youth civic engagement. The qualitative research shed some light on the barriers youth identify as discouraging them from participating more often in their community. Although young people see the benefits of civic engagement, they are often still reluctant, largely because they don’t feel a sense of respect – as illustrated in some of the quotes.

ASIAN-AMERICAN FEMALE: Some of the obstacles are youths’ mentality of not being important enough to be heard.

LGBTQ FEMALE: Usually our voices are disregarded due to being young and people not taking us seriously.

These same sets of concerns affect the way California young people think about voting. Nine in ten (91%) would be more likely to vote if they felt like a candidate will help make sure people like them will be treated with fairness and respect. Similarly, 92 percent are more likely to vote if a candidate shares their idea of what needs to change, and 89 percent say they would be more likely if they felt like their vote would help decide an issue that affects them or someone they care about.
**FIGURE 3**
Factors Most Likely to Increase Youth Interest in Voting
(Among Those Age 18 and Over)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling like your vote will help decide an issue that affects you, or someone you care about</th>
<th>Total More Likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having the chance to vote for a candidate for President who shares your idea of what needs to change</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having an understanding of the issues</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling like your vote will help to make sure people like you are treated with fairness and respect</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding out your vote will make the cost of going to college go down</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Why doesn’t a desire to promote positive change translate into voting?**

- **Among various forms of civic engagement available to young people, voting is one of the less popular choices.** Objective data from the voter rolls show that young registered voters participate at far lower rates than their older counterparts. The research data reveal the same trends. Just one-quarter of voting-age California youth (26%) say that they are following the Presidential election “very closely,” and as shown in **Figure 4**, fewer than half indicate that they are “very likely” to cast a ballot in November’s Presidential election.

**FIGURE 4**
Likelihood of Voting in November 2016

- Very likely: 48%
- Somewhat likely: 21%
- Somewhat unlikely: 10%
- Very unlikely: 9%
- Not registered to vote: 12%
• **Skepticism poses a significant obstacle to engagement.** Many of the youth we interviewed are highly skeptical of the political process and the ability of leaders to deliver results. There was also some sense that effective participation in the electoral process requires too much time or effort, and that the process is unpleasant and potentially closed to young people. It is worth noting that interest in voting was notably lower among youth in lower-income households (64%) and among eligible youth who are immigrants (44%).

Participants pointed out a number of obstacles to getting involved in trying to make change, which applied to political action as well:

- Lack of awareness of opportunities to participate,
- Discouragement or dismissiveness from adults,
- Concern about judgment from peers, and
- Competing demands for their time such as school and work.

### What would motivate young people to vote?

• **The data show a number of factors capable of generating significant interest among youth in voting.** When participants were offered a series of nearly two dozen potential opportunities that might encourage their participation at the polling place, the following were identified as *most* likely to motivate young voting-age Californians to cast a ballot:

  ✓ *Getting their neighborhood its fair share of parks, clean water and public transportation (89% “more likely” to vote);*
  ✓ *Having the chance to make health coverage available to everyone (85%);*
  ✓ *Finding out your vote will help decide whether the very rich will pay taxes to support better schools in your neighborhood (85%);* and
  ✓ *An opportunity to raise the minimum wage (82%).*

In addition, making the three strikes law less harsh was the strongest incentive among youth of color and immigrant youth.

### The Bottom Line

The data show that California young people offer the potential to be a remarkable force for social change. Most care passionately about social justice, want to be involved in efforts to create positive change in their community, and are strongly connected with their peers in online networks that offer opportunities for communication and organization for change of
which previous generations could only dream. At the same time, many California youth shy away from engagement in community issues – either because they feel disrespected or unwelcome, because they are alienated by our current political structure, or because they do not know how to get involved. The survey data show that with the right opportunities – ones that are enjoyable, connect them with other youth, affect the wide range of issues they care deeply about, and show that their involvement will make a difference – California youth can be brought into the public arena in ways that will help to make California a better place.

---

**Methodology:** The research included an online panel survey with 1,021 California youth aged 15-26, across 19 counties in the Central Valley and Southern California. The survey was conducted November 13-25, 2015. Participants were recruited to match Census data for the youth population, and the data were statistically weighted to endure demographic and geographic balance. The survey data was supplemented by four focus groups with youth in Fresno and Los Angeles, and in-depth online interviews with key segments of the population including Latino, African-American, Asian, LGBT, and undocumented youth.