The Right to Public Education: A Case Study of ICUC’s Proposition 30 Campaign

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Introduction

For the past four months I have been working as an intern with Inland Congregations United For Change. During my time with them, ICUC was at a major step in its history: taking on its first political campaign. With a few supervisors the youth of ICUC successfully ran a campaign to help get proposition 30 passed during the November 2012 elections. The passing of this proposition has helped to allow the youth to have a future education. Along with helping to work on the actual campaign, I was using various research methods and literature to discover the patterns and evolution of youth civic engagement over the past few decades. My work specifically looked into the connection between education and how civic engagement helps the youth in their education. Many of the authors I used as references in this paper, and even some of the Ontario, California youth, discussed a decrease in youth civic engagement over the past few decades. Yet I saw a drive from the people I worked with on the campaign that seemed to be the complete opposite. These students who were running the campaign in their area were extremely passionate about this line of work, and put all of their energy into making it a success. This study of how civic engagement is still a large part of youths’ lives shows the authors’ claims are wrong. These students who come from lives with low cultural capital have a hunger for knowledge about all things going on in the world,
and break the stereotype that many people will put upon students from this area. These youth are intelligent and want to make change, but a lot of society will already check them off as unsuccessful because of their background. That is why in this paper I prove how these assumptions are incorrect through reviewing the literature on the subject, and showing my research methods and results to prove that these youth are much more than society may write them off to be. Showing that even a marginalized group can create enormous positive change.

**Literature Review**

For the past few decades political sociologists have tried to understand why there has been a decline in civic engagement by youth (Dudley, Gitelson 2003). Particular among those studies is a focus on education. In this literature review I will discuss the literature on youth civic engagement in order to set the stage for my ethnographic case study of ICUC’s Proposition 30 Victory Campaign. The literature focuses on the necessity of a rounded civic education, the factors that influence a persons’ involvement in civic work, the ability to work with older generations and the new methods that are being used, and the decline in youth involvement throughout the past few decades.

Many scholars have dealt with the issue of youth civic engagement. The majority of these scholars come from the fields of sociology, psychology, and political science. Within these fields there are a few authors that stand out for their noteworthy contributions to the study of youth civic engagement. Several authors share a common focus on studies surrounding the various issues with youth civic
engagement in relation to the ability to continue certain movements and reform them to stay up-to-date, the influences that affect peoples’ level of involvement in civic engagement, the decline in youth civic engagement since the 1970s, and the short-comings in the education of youth in civic competence (Fisher 2012; Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, Keeter 2003; Dudley, Gitelson 2003; Niemi, Junn 1998; Delli Carpini 2000; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, Silbereisen 2002; Youniss 2009; Galston 2001; Porter 2006).

For this literature I will discuss the most relevant work around the complete education of youth on civic issues, the outside sources that influence the youth’s participation later in life, the decline in youth civic engagement in the past forty years, and the necessity of working with past generations to know and reform existing methods.

The involvement of youth in civic engagement is rooted in the amount of exposure they get towards politics and social work in their home life. Political Scientists Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, Cliff Zukin, and Scott Keeters’ work discusses the correlation between this exposure at home to how engaged the youth become in civic work beginning around adolescence. They write, “Habits formed at home, lessons learned at school, and opportunities offered by outside group all positively influence the civic engagement of youth” (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, Keeter 2003: 275). The authors go about proving this by using qualitative studies designed to explore political orientations and behavior of today’s youth. They combine those studies with a series of quantitative indicators they developed, and test those on various populations through phone and Internet surveys. They then use the results
of the quantitative and qualitative studies to create a survey instrument designed to measure civic and political engagement among all generations that was administered by phone. From this study they came to the conclusions that fewer youth are being reached by civic work organizations than in past generations, and that even though youth are still active volunteers they are not habitual in other civic duties like voting.

Political Scientist Stephen R. Porter attempts to investigate one of the factors that most influences the amount of civic engagement youth participate in by researching how institutions of higher learning affect their participation (Porter 2005). In the past, studies have had many flaws in their methods when trying to substantiate this correlation and have said that the connection cannot be verified (Porter 2006). Porter proves them wrong by using various methods in his article including the Beginning Post-secondary Student survey to show how institutional structures do affect student engagement in predictable and substantively significant ways.

One of the main reasons for these studies into what forces influence youths’ decision to participate in civic education is the drop in the numbers of youth participating in civic work since the late 1970s. Many scholars have focused their research on what caused this drop in participation. A collaborative article by a group of sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists discusses a theory of how the rebirth of youth civic engagement came about when the Cold War ended, after there was low involvement following the Civil Rights Movement (Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, Silbersein 2002). Psychologist James
Youniss goes more in depth about this in his own article which discusses how even with the decline in youth civic engagement during the late 1970s and 80s, the people who were part of the movement before that time continued to do civic work through their forties and fifties (Youniss 2009). Youniss goes on to discuss the critiques from people on both the political left and right in this article. The critics on the political left thought that the youth were not engaged in civic work anymore because they were turning towards selfish paths, pursuing personal happiness and wealth. The critics on the political right instead decided to put the blame on low scores on national tests of academic achievement and their aberrant behavior.

Political Scientist William A. Galston shows just how extreme the differences between youth in the early 1970s and 2000 are in regards to civic engagement. Galston says, “In the early 1970s, about one half of 18-29 year olds voted in Presidential elections. By 2000, only one third did. The same pattern holds for congressional elections – a bit more than one quarter in the mid-1970s, compared to less than one fifth in 2002 (Galston 2004: 263). He goes on to explain how crucial it is that this disengagement of youth participation will cause major problems in the coming years when they have to live in the world with the changes being made now. He finds three major problems, 1) a need to change the focus from the issues the older generations are keeping in headlines, to the issues the future of the current will depend on, 2) the need to make sure that public resources are continued and maintained for future generations, and 3) how political engagement helps to develop intellectual and moral capacities that are intrinsically important throughout a person’s life (Galston 2004).
One of the most discussed solutions/cause for youth civic engagement is a reform of how youth are learning about politics and government in their schools. Two of the people who are most critical of the current system are political scientists Robert Dudley and Alan Gitelson, who discuss how the current generation is not politically informed. Gitelson and Dudley use the analyses of Robert Luskin in their article that “...has been particularly critical of the linkage of education and political knowledge. His analysis argues that after controlling for intelligence, interests, and other individual attributes education has no significant effect on the level of political sophistication regarding political candidates or parties” (Dudley, Gitelson 2003: 265). They go on to discuss how more knowledge is needed by the current generation beyond simply learning about government functions. The youth need to increase their knowledge about political context through current events and learning about their representatives. Political scientists Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn discuss how the more knowledge and context people have around civic knowledge, the more confidence the people will have in discussing the varying topics in that realm (Niemi, Junn 1998). By being able to discuss issues with others the people will then be able to expand their own knowledge based on other peoples’ opinions. Niemi and Junn also bring about the idea that our government could only allow people to vote if they were educated enough on the issues, but if they were to do that then it would be a direct infringement on the democratic ideals that the United States stands upon.

The other aspect of civic education that people need to round off their knowledge is increased participation in proper service learning experiences (Delli
Delli Carpini and Keeter discuss how,

“...well-designed service learning projects would expose students to a great deal of essential contextual information about substantive issues, key political actors, the law, policy making, political participation (and the barriers hitherto)... All of the above suggests that including service as part of a students’ educational experience can increase their motivation and opportunity to learn about politics, which in turn could increase the likelihood of their continued engagement in public life” (Delli Carpini, Keeter 2000: 636).

Delli Carpini and Keeter heavily stress how hands-on learning will bring higher scores on civic engagement tests and will help people to understand how classroom and participatory experience feed off of each other, and must be combined in order to get the best results.

While hands-on civic engagement within different organizations is crucial to having a well-rounded civic education, there is no one magic program of service or type of social movement that is most successful in engaging youth in civic life (Youniss 2009). Once youth are able to utilize these skills it is necessary for them to begin taking the reigns from the older generations and using the knowledge they’ve been taught to reform the civic systems to fit in with the changing world (Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, Silbersein 2002).

Dana R. Fisher gives a great look into how youth are now being civically engaged and how the realm of civic engagement has changed in recent years with
The dot com boom. Fisher discusses how the 2008 and 2012 campaigns have/will highlight this new era in civic engagement, and how this new system will help to bring the youth in using the new technologies that is common presently (Fisher 2012).

The literature around youth civic engagement clearly shows the influences and education that are needed and in place to achieve the ability to fully participate in political work, but more research is needed on modern methods of civic work and how the rapidly evolving technology is affecting the political and social process, specifically how youth are being brought back in by new opportunities. For the remainder of this paper I will be discussing my research in the field of youth civic engagement.

**Research Methods**

For the past few months I have been working with Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC) as an intern through Pitzer’s Ontario Program. Inland Congregations United for Change is an affiliate of the PICO National Network and of PICO California, the largest grassroots community effort in California. ICUC works with congregations, schools, and neighborhood institutions in San Bernardino and Riverside County to bring families together and improve communities. They focus on community interests such as increasing access to health insurance; pubic safety and violence prevention; increasing parks and recreation opportunities; and public works projects. ICUC also does work in increasing nutrition in school meals, opening forums for the community to voice ways to better
the education systems, and creating programs that will help youth gain employment in the area.

These projects are what ICUC is normally working on, but for the past few months they took on a new task: campaigning for the passage of Proposition 30. Prior to this, ICUC had never run a political campaign before. Although there were many campaigns going on this fall, ICUC’s campaign was different in that the youth were the ones running a large part of this operation. With that in mind, each region of ICUC also had an ICUC employee who was the campaign organizer/supervisor for that region. Due to my location, I worked with Nicole Scheuneman, the lead organizer in Ontario. During the course of the semester my internship site alternated between working in the city of Ontario with the youth, and phone banking multiple times a week at Pitzer College with Jared Calvert as the other head of the campaign here at the Claremont Colleges. Throughout the course of the campaign I spent a majority of my time at Pitzer’s phone bank (approximately 3-4 times a week). Beginning in October I started to work more within the community by going to meetings with the ICUC youth and Nicole, phone banking in different locations, and door knocking with the youth in Ontario.

At the beginning of the semester I was originally sent to a training session to learn about the details of proposition 30 and the campaign methods from the director of PICO California. This training session was my first real interaction with the communities working on the campaign. Even though I felt out of place at first, I was brought in and taught about both the technical and personal aspects of the campaign for PICO California and the people involved in this cause.
Along with the phone banking and door knocking, a primary job of mine was getting recorded interviews with ICUC youth before and after the election. For the first few interviews I used a video camera to record the discussion, but after that they were recorded via a digital recording program on my computer. The interviews I did during the course of the past few months took place both in Ontario and in San Bernardino with the youth working on the campaign in those locations. The original interviews I recorded were of five youth in San Bernardino who were asked open questions about their roles in ICUC, the reasons they are working with ICUC, and what the passage or failure of Proposition 30 meant for them. These interviews were all fairly short and only somewhat formal, and were meant to help bring a personal side to the people who would be negatively affected, should Prop 30 fail.

The youth in this round of interviews were the ones who agreed to talk about the proposition on camera from the group of about ten volunteers there that day. That day my role was primarily to get the footage for both my project and ICUC's records. Although the youth barely knew me, they were mostly open to having their stories and thoughts recorded.

The next round of recorded interviews occurred in the weeks following the end of the campaign, and focused on getting feedback from the youth about their opinions on the campaign methods, as well as what they would like to see happening next in their community. Although these were structured in a formal way, they often went on tangents based on what the various youth answered. For this part I spoke with mostly core members of ICUC Ontario who were working in the heart of the campaign from the start. Nicole and I chose these people because
they would have the most experience, as well as constant interaction with the other volunteers who came both regularly and only once or twice to help. The interviews during this round lasted longer than the earlier ones, in part because there were concrete results from the election, and made them less anxious about what the results would do for their futures. Along with being longer, these interviews flowed much better due to both me having more experience performing the interviews, and the youth feeling more comfortable around me having worked with me for the past few months.

Once these interviews were all finished I was able to listen over them to transcribe them into written notes. During the campaign I had also been taking my own field notes to record my thoughts and experiences with the different aspects of ICUC’s work to get Proposition 30 passed. The final step in my research methods was to go through both my field notes and interview transcriptions to pick out the major themes that are mentioned and to see how these themes evolved during the course of the campaign and to evaluate how certain parts stayed consistent between the different cities and points in this project.

**Research Analysis and Discussion**

Using these research methods I was able to code and analyze my findings into three major themes. These three major themes ended up being chronological, due to the nature of my internship project this semester. The first of these themes I saw was the concern the youth I spoke with showed about the problems currently
happening in the education system, as well as the fear they showed about their future if Proposition 30 did not pass.

Throughout the Inland Empire there is a severe lack of supplies and teachers in almost all of the public schools. I learned about some of these problems that were in place during a PICO civic engagement speaker training session in Riverside, California in early September. Part of the session was having people there practice media interviews that may happen during the campaign. They were each given two minutes to say why they are part of the campaign, and why it is so crucial for the proposition to be passed. Among the reasons people gave, the main ones were the already lacking number of supplies the school’s have for such a large number of kids. For some the physical supplies used in the classrooms were hard to obtain, and many of the students who attend these schools cannot afford to get them on their own. Along with supplies for the classroom, students on free lunch programs were going home undernourished because of the cuts to the program. This was my first experience hearing just what level the situation had gotten to in this region. It also showed me the importance of having ICUC put a face to the campaign by having the youth who are already participating in the campaign share their story to increase interest and bring the human side to the proposition.

Along with a lack of supplies, the tuition hikes that would occur from the budget cuts if Proposition 30 did not pass are also a huge problem. Most of the youth I interviewed discussed how these increases in tuition would result in an even higher amount of student loans they would need in order to pay for college, even with financial aid. Andrew Doyle, a freshman at the University of California
Riverside, said, “I already have thousands of dollars in loans, so if my tuition rises I will have to take out a lot more loans, and by the time I graduate I will be well over $100,000 in debt” (A.D., Interview, September 20, 2012). Andrew’s interview is a direct example of what both high school students, and students in public colleges and universities, would have to go through. If Proposition 30 had not passed, the budget cuts that would go into affect would make these schools increase their tuition to keep the school running at something close to the level they are currently at. Along with the fear of having an increased amount of debt in the future, other students took a more positive approach, discussing how if the proposition passed the amount of financial aid the government would supply could still make their dreams of going to college a reality. Osmond Martin spoke about this during his interview when he said, “I really don’t want to go through the harsh process of having to pay all that money, all those thousands of dollars for my classes. That way the government can fund more of our schools, so that way students like me don’t have to pay as much” (O.M., Interview, September 20, 2012).

Students who are still in high school also had concerns about the current situation in high schools getting even worse if the proposition did not pass. If it did pass then the schools would get more money to function, but if it did not, then the schools would have their budgets cut to even less than they are now. Alice Aguas phrased this concern perfectly when she said, “…I’m a student in high school and I’m also an IB and I actually care and I don’t want fifteen days cut and I don’t want $24 million cut cause that’s going to affect me a lot” (A.A., Interview, September 20, 2012). Alice is describing what almost every person I interviewed said. She is a
perfect example of many of these students who are working extremely hard, but will have their chances for getting into schools cut further because of circumstances that can be amended so easily with the passage of proposition 30. Alejandro Santo is another student whose concerns reflect many of the youth, in that the stress levels will go up when they have even less supplies and time to finish the classes they are taking by the end of the shortened year. Santo says, “I’m going to lose fifteen days from school and the curriculum’s going to be packed, and we’re going to have to be able to learn a lot more things in a lot less time. That’s going to be even more stressful on us as high school students” (A.S., Interview, September 20, 2012). David Arroya, another high school student, phrased his concerns about the ripple that the failure of proposition 30 would bring towards his current education, and the possibilities for him for the future. Arroya said, “If it fails I believe my education will become less than what it can already be, so I won’t be at my full potential to get into other schools and colleges” (D.A., Interview, September 20, 2012). David brings to light how these cuts could not only make it harder to get into colleges because of tuition hikes, but also how the cuts to k-12 education could bring down his grades, which are crucial to his future success.

Along with education being the major concern in the passage of Proposition 30, students also mentioned the aspect of the proposition that would help to better whole communities by increasing the public safety budget. In San Bernardino especially this part of the proposition is crucial to protecting the citizens of the city. Since the city of San Bernardino declared bankruptcy (and even during the time leading up to it) the city’s crime rates have risen and made it a lot more dangerous
for the people living there. This necessary part of the city could begin to be fixed with the passage of the proposition.

The campaign process was of course a major discussion point in the interviews I did, as well as my overall experience with ICUC. Throughout the course of the campaign I worked both at Pitzer and in Ontario doing phone banking and door knocking to help get the proposition passed. These were the primary methods used by ICUC, and PICO California as a whole. Both of these methods gave great results, but also ran into many problems during the course of the campaign.

Phone banking was used by ICUC from the beginning of the campaign, and of course had some problematic points among its great success. Orlando Baja gave some of the best insight into this, since he was one of the campaign leaders for the Ontario chapter. Baja focused on the problematic parts of phone banking when I interviewed him about the successes and problems during the campaign. Baja said, “The system itself while we were phone banking, that could have been fixed, but that wasn’t in our hands... I remember that Nicole was on the phone for hours trying to get that fixed” (O.B., Interview, November 29, 2012). While some of the youth discussed the problems experienced while phone banking, others talked about the amazing successes it allowed. Andrea Rollos describes it well when talking about the wide range of people we were able to reach because of the system. Rollos said, “Our phone banking would call to people that weren’t in our region, and then door knocking gave that extra push that we needed to get those other percentages” (A.R., Interview, November 27, 2012). One of the other great things about the phone banking process was that you could do it from almost anywhere that had Internet.
During the campaign ICUC helped to supply computers and phones specifically for phone banking. This was a huge thing to do since many of the places they were calling out of were not able to afford those supplies for the youth to use. Rebecca Rollos specifically mentioned this during an interview saying, “I was glad that we were able to get the phones and laptops to call everybody” (R.R., Interview, November 27, 2012). Both Rebecca and Andrea focused on the successful parts of the campaigns during their interviews, and shared how they thought that phone banking worked perfectly during it.

Along with phone banking, PICO California used door knocking as a primary tool to educate and get people to vote during the campaign. This process helped a lot for many reasons. One of the best was how it helped to put a face to the campaign and the overall proposition. It showed people who the proposition would be directly affecting, rather than just hearing a voice over the phone. Along with giving a face to the proposition, it allowed us to educate people about the campaign in person. This method of explaining it worked best in my opinion since the people in the area were able to ask questions and learn about it more in-depth than they would over the phone. Although we had a lot of success with this method we still ran into a few problems. The main one of these was that many people were simply not home when we came around. Orlando Baja describes the process very well saying, “The door knocking was good, the only problem with door knocking was that people weren’t always there. It’s not our fault, but we could have had more rounds. We could have gone around and around. Not just once, and we marked them as not home” (O.B., Interview, November 29, 2012).
The problem of not being able to go back to houses that were marked as not home is also part of the major problem experienced throughout the various campaign methods: there was a severe lack of volunteers that regularly helped on the campaign. Jaime Marquez, one of the other campaign leaders, listed this as one of the problems he saw during the campaign during an interview. Marquez said, “First of all, the numbers. I think we could have done a lot better. If each person could have brought...one more person we could have had fifty volunteers” (J.M., Interview, November 29, 2012).

For a large part of the campaign I worked out of Pitzer College helping Jared Calvert run the phone bank at the college. My job there was to call people at the schools that had given their contact information to volunteer on the campaign, and to help Jared on the days we were doing the actual phone banking. The night before each day we were phone banking I would call people from a list who had volunteered to help that day. Many of those people ended up either not being available, or simply not responding to the voicemails I would leave if they did not pick up. After a few weeks of these calls, almost all of the people who answered would request that we take them off of the list for various reasons. Our regular group of phone bankers was very small, and would usually consist of about four or five people (including me). Along with the regular group we had a few volunteers show up once or twice during the earlier parts of the semester.

While making the calls both at Pitzer and in Ontario, I got a large range of responses. In my field notes I described these responses saying, “For most calls I will get a wrong number, somebody who hung before I said anything, somebody who
doesn’t speak English, or simply someone who hung up as soon as they hear my intro line ‘I am a volunteer with PICO California and am calling to get the word out about prop 30’” (Wolf, 2012). While this was the case for many of the calls, we also had real discussions with some of the people. A few of them would be willing to hear at least a brief summary of what the proposition is and would do, if they did not know about it. Starting in the beginning of October we would get more negative feedback from people who had decided to stand against the proposition. These conversations sometimes led to longer arguments/discussions, during which we would try to explain how this proposition was for good, and not simply taking money from them for the general fund.

One of the greatest moments for me happened on election night. When me and the other Ontario students left the house to go back to campus, the results for proposition 30 had not come in yet. Around midnight I got a text message from Bernardo Alvarez, one of the Ontario youth leaders on the campaign, telling me that the proposition had passed. Although it was only a text message, I could see the excitement and feeling of accomplishment he was expressing in it. Although Bernardo was the only one who sent me a message, I knew the rest of the youth were all just as excited as him. After this process was done, and people had a week or two to rest up after the long campaign, I had the chance to interview some of the youth about their experience working on this huge project.

One of the main themes within that were the opportunities that were now available to them with the passage of Proposition 30. Although she was younger then most of the youth I spoke with, Rebecca Rollos still had her concerns about her
opportunities for college telling me what she saw her future as if it did not pass. Rebecca said, “If prop 30 wouldn’t have passed I would have had to set my limits lower for which college or university I want to go to, but now that it’s passed it helps me a lot. I know that I have more options to go to, and more help and that stuff” (R.R., Interview, November 27, 2012). Along with her take on the passage of prop 30, I also heard the youth who were high school seniors tell me about how important it was for their immediate futures. Orlando Baja best phrased this saying, “A few weeks before I finished applying for my Cal States, I got an e-mail back from each of the Cal States saying your application is on hold until the deadline of November 30 and will not be read until prop 30 is passed” (O.B., Interview, November 29, 2012). All of the seniors I spoke with mentioned this in some way during post-election interviews. The fact that schools would not even look at students’ applications until the proposition results came in shows yet another example of how crucial this proposition was for the youth in California.

Without the passage of Proposition 30, many of the youth would have had almost no chance of getting into public colleges or universities. This was due to two main reasons. First, the budget cuts would have forced the schools to decrease the number of applicants they could accept greatly, making it that much harder for these students to get in. Along with the schools having to cut incoming class sizes, they would also have to raise their tuition cost, making the schools unaffordable for many people.

During the post-election interviews we also discussed what ICUC youth think Ontario should work on next. One of the most mentioned project ideas was creating
an ethnic studies class at Ontario High School. Most of the interviewees had opinions on this, Andrea Rollos described the purpose of the course to me in one way, saying, “...There would be an ethnic studies class. The teacher would talk about their background and how it is instead of getting into drugs or other bad stuff. They should be prideful about their ethnicities” (A.R., Interview, November 27, 2012). As a leader in ICUC Ontario, Orlando Baja was able to give more of an in-depth description of the course and past efforts to get it created. Baja told me, “I think they’ll do this because the excuse was that they didn’t have enough funding, but now we do. We now have Measure P and Prop 30 and political power as ICUC, so they shouldn’t have anything to say. Ethnic studies meaning we’ll have a specific class that helps certain ethnicities to feel empowered about who they are. Not just empower them as a person, but to go on with their studies and represent the rest of their race” (O.B., Interview, November 29, 2012).

Along with the ethnic studies class, the youth leaders gave a few different ideas for potential projects to pick up, including work towards making the school food healthier. Orlando also put this out as a project to restart the project saying how they need to get back to “…the food, we tried to move that and we kind of put it on hold. We should go back to that because school food, nutrition, is lacking right now and a lot of people, knowing we as ICUC have begun working on that and now it’s going to the original way, they’re asking: can you guys do something about this” (O.B., Interview, November 29, 2012). Along with this idea, another ICUC Ontario youth leader gave his suggestions for what the next project should be. Jaime Marquez suggested, “…I say we do a public opinion and...what is one of the issues
that concerns you guys in Ontario, and then whatever the community wants we
try...to work on that to fulfill our communities’ desires” (J.M., Interview, November
29, 2012). These projects all show the amount of effort and passion these youth put
into improving the lifestyle of both them and their communities.

**Cultural Capital’s Role in Education**

Along with my research in the field, there is also literature helping to put into
context the need for a more balanced system of assessing youth academically. This
relates directly to the Proposition 30 campaign in that the youth involved make up
one end of the spectrum of cultural capital. Cultural capital has not yet been able to
be defined directly, but there are different theories made about the concept, and
how the varying backgrounds that youth have can allow for greater or fewer
benefits in most aspects of society. My research around this subject is based both on
field experience and the article “Cultural Capital in Educational Research: A Critical
Assessment” by Sociologists Annette Lareau and Elliot B. Weininger. In this article
Lareau and Weininger focus around how “The concept of ‘capital’ has enabled
researchers to view culture as a resource – one that provides access to scarce
rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be
transmitted from one generation to the next” (Lareau and Weininger, 2003). These
main themes are discussed in relation to education for youth from different
backgrounds in both the text, and my observations while interning with ICUC for the
past few months. Within their article Lareau and Weininger reference various other
authors, including Sociologist Paul DiMaggio, who created one of the popular
theories surrounding cultural capital in relation to education. The authors quote DiMaggio in their article saying, “...any (net) association between cultural capital and students’ grades stems from tendencies of ‘teachers ... [to] communicate more easily with students who participate in elite status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack’ the requisite traits, tastes, and styles” (DiMaggio, 1982 by Lareau and Weininger, 2003). This theory goes into the idea that students coming from more affluent backgrounds are put into a higher bracket in schools because of their upbringing (richer in cultural capital than those coming from lower classes).

When putting cultural capital into the context of a person’s background it is measured in a few ways. These measurements primarily include an individual’s social class, racial background, and the amount of “highbrow” activities done to show how a person interacts in society, and especially in this article, how they interact in a school setting.

The work I have done with ICUC youth showed me the other end of the cultural capital spectrum from what I have experienced in my life. I come from the background that gains more privilege from cultural capital since I am a white Jewish male who grew up in an affluent area with exposure to “highbrow” activities from an early age. I was made aware of different facts and ideas that allowed my take on life and education to differ from those on the other end of the spectrum. The youth that I worked with in ICUC fall into that end of the spectrum having come from more working class families, being of Hispanic descent, and not as likely to be exposed to the “highbrow” activities as someone from my end. This background has put them in
a position where they are quickly classified as not being given the attention, resources, or privilege that they may have gotten if they came from a background with greater cultural capital.

My experience speaking with the youth has given me the opportunity to see beyond the label that society has put on them based on the assumed level of cultural capital, and allowed me to see that even if they haven’t been exposed to the same amount of “highbrow” activities as someone like me, they put the extra effort into expanding their experience and knowledge.

I had a chance to speak with mostly seniors in high school during the campaign about their college prospects, and among the usual public colleges and universities they were trying to get into highly ranked public schools like the Claremont Colleges. Even if they were at the same intellectual level as students at the schools, their level of cultural capital put them at a huge disadvantage to other applicants. Among those factors working against them, the issue of tuition could have them turned away for needing more financial aid than some students who may even be less qualified for the school than them. This is a direct example of how cultural capital can play a negative role in peoples’ lives, making them have slimmer chances of improving their situation because of their current one.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this past semester I have been given the opportunity, through ICUC, to speak with youth who are sometimes marginalized because of their backgrounds. These youth who have grown up in areas of lower cultural capital
have shown how great a power they can be when they come together to make positive change. This campaign has proven that ICUC can create a successful political movement and are now a force that can make even more change in the political world. Socially, I saw in these students that society may write them off as less because they come from a working class background, but they proved how passionate they are about improving that lifestyle for both themselves and future generations. In this paper I have proven how even with youth civic engagement numbers decreasing over the past few decades, there is now a resurgence of people wanting to make change, and encouraging their peers to do the same. Although I felt I had a good amount of success in showing that in my work, I mostly wish that I could have had more time in the community working hands-on with ICUC. This extra experience would have helped to increase my research base and give more time to hear the youths’ stories of wanting to make change. Along with the questions I discuss in this paper, I still want to continue my work around the ever-evolving field of youth civic engagement and how it is beginning to have a new wave of people participating, more then there has been since the early 1980s. This new wave of youth that come from all walks of life, working to make positive change, will help to bring important problems to light, and to ensure our voices are heard.
References


