

Social Capital: Alive And Well But Needed More Than Ever

*The California Community College Scholastic Honor Society--Gamma Sigma Chapter, Riverside City College--Southern Regional Conference—"Better Tomorrow"
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--Thank you to Dora Medrano for the invitation.

--Congratulations to members of the Community College Honor Society.

--You are here because of your good work in the classroom. Kudos to your scholarship.

--You are here because of your willingness to be involved. Kudos to your participation. The best students I have taught at UCR took risks, went above and beyond the classroom.

--You are here as Millennials (those born between 1980 and 2000). Kudos to your reported greater interest in civic engagement and participation.

--Today, I am going to cover four topics in this keynote address: low turnout for local elections; reasons for the low turnout; importance of civic participation and voting in local elections; and social capital as making a difference.

I. Low voting turnout for local elections.

--Recent vote for Mayor in San Bernardino. Context.... What was the turnout? It was 16%.

--Low turnout is found not only in San Bernardino but elsewhere. For examples, in the election for Mayor in Los Angeles it was 15% in the primary and 23% in the run-off.

Eric Garcetti won the mayor's race in Los Angeles with fewer votes than any newly elected mayor since the 1930's.

--Cities are often described as: "grass roots democracy," "where the rubber hits the road," "where results, not ideology matter," "government closest to the people," "where government directly impacts voters' lives," "laboratories of democracy," et cetera....

--Yet, there is a low voter turnout in local elections, and these numbers are declining. They are 60% or more for national elections, something less for state elections, and more in the range of 20 to 25% for local elections.

II. Why the low level of voting in local elections? And why the recent decline?

--You are familiar with the profile of who does vote. The three most important characteristics or variables are age, ethnicity, and SES (social economic status). People who look like me are more likely to vote.

--How many of you have voted in a recent city election?

--I remember my effort to get UCR students to vote when I ran for re-election to the City Council. I tried, but there was almost no increase in voting. Being a friendly UCR professor did not make a difference.

--What are the causes for a low local election turnout, and especially for those under 30?

Let's look at five reasons.

1st) Decline of local newspapers and local television news.

--The days when the local newspaper's headlines dictated the city's television and radio coverage are past. Big time declines in newspaper readership.

--In your lifetime, most local papers will likely disappear, with the NY Times and Wall Street Journal remaining as national newspapers.

--There is no attention to local newspapers by Millennials. I asked my class a couple of weeks ago....You are the Net generation.

--Yahoo and Google do not cover local news, or if they do so, it is a very minor part.

--How many of you watch a local TV news program at least three days a week?

--If you watch local TV news, what do you see? Yellow ribbon stories provide the headlines--if it bleeds, it leads. And human interest stories are hyped.

--In brief, place is not important news. For Southern California, it is also quite difficult to cover six counties and over 180 cities.

--There is even less local news coverage on the radio. KNX is an exception--though traffic reports are its principal attraction. And PBS primarily covers national rather than local news.

2nd) Internet's nationalizing role.

--Internet directs attention to national news and politics. Connects all of us to issues and people a long distance from where we live, work, and play.

--Writing out of San Francisco, Randy Shaw says, "Recall Wendy Davis' recent abortion rights filibuster in Texas. I would bet more San Francisco voters watched Davis' action on YouTube or another online source than will vote in the November 6th election."

--Can you think of a city issue that leads people to YouTube?

--Twitter also shifts voter interest away from local to national politics.

3rd) Rise of cable/satellite television.

--There are few nightly shows in any city that discuss local news. However, there are dozens on FOX, MSNBC, and other news outlets focused on national and international news.

--It's been said that young voters are more likely to get their news from Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert than from a daily newspaper. Noteworthy, both shows focus on national issues.

4th) For Millennials, there is little or no classroom attention to place, to local politics and/or to urban policies in K-12 or in College.

--When do you study local government/politics?

--Not in high school, and for the most part, not at UC,CSU, or Community Colleges.

--Let me offer an example from Political Science 10....James Q. Wilson, Ch. 21....

--What about service learning? How many of you have taken courses involving service learning. Research points to important results...it should be encouraged!

5th) For those under 30, there is little or no attachment to place.

--You move from one city to another. Civic involvement is minimal--the focus is getting started with career and life. Place is important for lifestyle, but not for participation. There are striking voting differences between renters and home owners. Talking to renters....they can/will move.

III. Why are local elections important? Or expressed differently, why give a damn?

--Voting is a matter of civic duty, of being a good citizen. The right to vote for those 18 to 21 was an opportunity many young people sought!

--Major point from my time in local office--people vote with their feet.... If it is important and relevant to them, they will come, they will participate, and they will vote.

--Why don't you vote? Why don't you participate in local elections?

Answer--it doesn't make any difference? It is not relevant. This is the same answer many will likely offer.

--Yet, statistically, your vote is obviously much more important in local elections than your vote in national elections.

--And speaking as a political scientist, local elections matter. Who is elected matters. Therefore, your vote matters.

--Let me quickly offer ten reasons why you should pay attention to local government, participate in the civic life of your city, and vote in local elections. These are the reasons I emphasize to university students when I teach at UCR.

--They are from the perspective of a political scientist (I have taught at UCR since 1965) and as elected official (Council member, 1979-94; Mayor, 1994-2012).

1) STUDENT OF AMERICAN POLITICS....federalism...many local governments (to wit, 90,000 local governments, 19,000 cities and town in the US and in CA: 58 counties, 482 cities, 5,000 special districts, and 1,200 school districts.)

2) WHERE THE ACTION IS....employees: 10 M local, 4 M state, and 3 M federal.

Money is spent locally; services include education, transportation, welfare, criminal justice, health, physical environment, et cetera.

Tell me the last federal employee you have met?

3) WHERE YOU LIVE....where you work, play, raise a family, ride a bike, buy a home, et cetera. The primary quality of life measures are local measures!

4) ACCESS/PARTICIPATION....signature value of local government. Contrast Mayor with the President. Let me introduce the concept of slack resources.

5) ROLE OF GOOD CITIZEN...obligation as community college graduate. Information, Make a difference. Take part in community affairs.

6) POLICY LABORATORIES....initiatives, innovations.

7) REGIONAL ECONOMICS....21st Century is the century of regions.

8) NEW GOVERNMENTAL FRAMEWORK...global marketplace, region, and neighborhood.

9) QUEST FOR COMMUNITY. You recognize the extraordinary diversity of Southern California. I like the quote from Dan Walters, the State's leading political columnist... Can we all get along?

10) ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL.

IV. Social capital deserves attention because it makes a difference.

--When in office for 32 years, 14 as a Council member and 18 as Mayor, I organized ideas and initiatives around major concepts.

--You need to know where you are going, and why. You need ways to think about the good community.

There is no concept that I emphasized more than social capital.

--The best known analyst, and advocate, of social capital is Robert Putnam, a highly respected Harvard Political Scientist.

--Based on extensive social science research, Putnam says that social capital makes us "smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy."

Why? How? Here are Putnam's arguments.

--First, social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily.

--Second, social capital greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly.

--A third way in which social capital improves our lot is by widening our awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked.

--The conclusion--community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference to our lives.

--Nine years ago, in 2004, Partners for Livable Communities selected Riverside as one of 30 "Most Livable" cities in America. It was a major honor and important recognition that important things were happening in Riverside! We could compete with the best cities in the country.

At the Washington Press Club, when cities accepted their awards, many mayors talked about specific initiatives, often with "this is what I did emphasize." When I accepted Riverside's award, social capital was the primary reason I offered for our city's success.

--As defined by Putnam, social capital centers on connections among people, social networks, and the resulting reciprocity and trust.

--The central thesis of social capital theory is that 'relationships matter', that 'social networks are a valuable asset'. Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric.

--In 2013, cities, technology, and life styles are changing, and rapidly so. Making connections are different and in many ways, more difficult.

--Cities require effective governance, yet government alone cannot create successful cities. Civic engagement goes beyond the formal participation process, beyond city boards and commissions, and even beyond voting.

--The question--how can we encourage current connections and at the same time, spark our civic imagination, our social capital to discover new ways of connecting that fit our changed lives.

--In past State of City addresses as Mayor, I identified various ways to increase social capital and to enhance civic engagement. Let me highlight a few of those recommendations.

Service clubs are signature statements of social capital. They should be recognized and valued, both for bringing people together and for their many civic projects.

Volunteers should be aggressively sought, both by cities and by community groups.

Neighborhoods are where we live, raise our children, and homes represent our largest personal investment. Neighborhood councils and groups should be strongly encouraged.

Youth must be a focus for increased civic engagement. As Mayor, I took pride in the City's Youth Council. I strongly support some kind of service learning for high school students.

Seniors also must be a focus for increased civic engagement. Dowell Myers, a nationally renowned USC professor, says that the future success of cities will importantly depend on how they engage the boomer generation.

Non-profit groups should be recognized, respected, and celebrated.

--The above recommendations are examples of traditional ways of increasing social capital.

--However, the internet is changing everything we do. The social media is the new dynamic that is connecting all of us, in one way or another.

--Civic engagement is coming of age. Local governments are experimenting as never before. Civic engagement is a top priority for many local professional groups, such as the International City Management Association.

--Lt. Governor Gavin Newsom has written a new book called *Citizenville*. It offers many important ways for a city to connect with its citizenry. It represents a digital agenda for all of us. Here is a summary of his book.

--*Citizenville* is the story of how ordinary citizens can use new digital tools to dissolve political gridlock and transform American democracy. As social networking and smart phones have changed the way we communicate with one another, these technologies are also changing our relationship with government.

--In a world where people can do anything at the touch of a button—shop, communicate, do research, publish a blog, transfer money—government cannot keep functioning in a twentieth-century mind-set. Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom explores the many ways in which technology can transform government and empower citizens.

--We all recognize that the increasing inequality erodes the American dream. A few weeks ago, four economists at Harvard and UC Berkeley released a path-breaking study of mobility within the United States....The most important correlation in the Harvard-Berkeley study appears to be social capital. Cities with strong families, civic support groups, and a community-service orientation do well on social and economic mobility.

--One good example of social capital is the Gamma Sigma Chapter at Riverside City College.

--And as to local elections, social capital matters. The higher the social capital, the higher the local engagement, the participation, and the voting turnout!

Let me close with the final paragraph of a book by Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein called *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*.

It frames an important challenge facing your generation, the Millennials! And it frames an important challenge for the members of the California Community College Scholastic Honor Society.

“Over the past generation, America’s communities have undergone profound social and cultural changes, which meant that as the new millennium dawned, we were no longer building the dense webs of encounter and participation so vital to the health of ourselves, our families, and our politics. These changes included the privatization of leisure time that accompanied the explosion of electronic

entertainment; the labor market changes that drew ever greater numbers of adults out of home-based unpaid work and into long hours of paid employment; and the suburban sprawl that bifurcates our communities of residence from our communities of work. Reweaving social webs will depend in part on the efforts of dedicated local leaders who choose to pursue their goals through the sometimes slow, frequently fractious, and profoundly transformative route of social -capital building. But reweaving will also depend on our ability to create new spaces for recognition, reconnection, conversation, and debate. Creating these spaces will require innovative uses of technology, creative urban and regional planning, and political will.”

--Thank you for your attention. God speed in fostering social capital!