**Welcome to this Civic Engagement Exercise**

Before we begin our exercise, let’s talk a little about what you think of when you think of civic engagement.

*Small group warm-up:*

*1. Ask group the following questions:*

*When you hear the phrase “civic engagement” (or involvement), what specific actions do you think of? What is civic involvement?*

*(Typical response – voting, keeping tabs on politicians, volunteering)*

*2. Okay – so which of these actions do you believe is more important in your commitment to your community?*

*(Typical response – more for volunteering, less for voting)*

Well, that difference in your response is what brings us here today. And it is what we will be discussing today.

We are here today because “no voice” means “no action”, and today the voice of young people is not loud enough. We are citizens of a nation whose constitution begins by providing its inhabitants the right of voice, but a lot of young people have not realized the power of voice, the meaning of voice, and the possibilities of voice.

Case in point -- Almost 60% of American youth (18 – 24) do not vote in national presidential elections. That is compared to more than 70% of eligible voters over 25 who do vote! What’s even more astounding is that turnout in the 2004 national elections were even lower – less than 25% of young people voted in those elections!

One might ask why voting is so important. Does an individual vote really matter, can it make a difference?

Well, all of those “single votes” can add up. Many elections – for local, state, and federal government – are very close, often coming down to 5000, 500, 50 – sometimes even 5 votes.

The truth, however, is that having a voice is not just about voting. It is about civic engagement in any manner – it is how we contribute to the communities we live in.

Voting is a quantitative measure of whether you are involved or not. It is the minimum requirement that is expect of citizens of a nation. But, it is in no way all that you can do to partake in local and national affairs that concern you.

Our community is our responsibility. Only we can structure it in the way we want it to be – the issues we think are important and the pressing concerns we have about our nation’s future won’t resolve themselves. There are also lots of key things that we forget are related to government and, therefore, to voting.

*Mini-group discussion: Think of five things that are completely unrelated to voting.*

*(Typical responses: shopping, driving, eating, family, air, water)*

*How these things are related to voting (pick one and let group discuss others, fill in conversation where needed):*

* *shopping – sales tax and taxes paid by store, passed on to shopper; what we can buy is in many ways regulated, where stores can be located (many “adult” businesses have restricted areas and signage)*
* *driving – speed limit, car sales tax, when cars can be sold – not on Sunday in some states*
* *eating – food regulated by FDA, many agricultural items subsidized by the government; local health board regulation at groceries and restaurants*
* *family – government in many ways defines family (divorce laws, bans on gay adoption, government defines many health care considerations on family based on their requirements for government health care packages)*
* *air & water – what and how much corporations can pollute (local and national), government decisions to highlight air and water safety - “no-zone action days” for example – are often funded or staff through government*

All this can seem overwhelming – so much of our lives are impacted by government decisions. However, when we realize that we truly are the government, that we can lobby the government, that we can protest our government, and that MOST SIGNIFCANTLY, we choose the government, it’s actually empowering.

Let’s return to my opening question: What is civic engagement for young people today? (Volunteerism vs. voting)

This paradigm – to view service as central to civic engagement – is a common perspective for young people of today. Volunteering is at an all-time high – some surveys show that as many as 75% of young people volunteer regularly in their communities.

So, we can see that young people are not completely disengaged. Rather they – YOU – are doing work that is not traditionally considered part of “civic participation”. As one student put it, “I don’t do traditional politics, but my service work is political.”

Then, the question becomes, why do they not do “traditional politics”? What is “traditional politics”? And how can we merge together “traditional politics” with the new wave of “service politics”, especially when we realize how much of our lives are impacted by “traditional politics”?

Hopefully, today we will offer you an opportunity to think about what it means to take on the responsibility of having an active voice in political decision-making and how that responsibility is in many ways an extension of the “service politics” and civic engagement that the majority of young people are already involved in.

Words can only describe the current voting situation to a certain point, the rest is best demonstrated, and for this reason, we will now have a simulation to describe what voice means.

I am going to explain how this demonstration will work. When you came in today, you were given a slip of colored paper with a brief description of your character for today’s event. The color on your paper will determine your level of involvement in this exercise.

A blue ticket provides Voice and Action. A yellow ticket provides Voice, but NO Action. A pink ticket provides No Voice and No Action. A little fewer than 40% of you received pink tickets, a little fewer than 40% of you received green tickets, and a little more than 20 % of you received pink tickets. This exercise attempts to bring a real life demonstration of the low level of civic participation among youth in the USA.

Before we split into smaller groups, I’d like to begin with a question that is central to voting – resource distribution. When you think of the political process, what are the key resources that are up for distribution?

What is our key resource today?

Since our primary resource today will be food, let’s start out by determining how we, as a group, will get lunch. Basically, you’re going to decide how these snacks are distributed. Who, what, when, where, how? (Write on board, if possible.) This is a democracy, so, once there is a proposal, those of you with the power of voice and action – voting – will take a vote.

As we begin the discussion that will determine these answers, those of you who have pink tickets will not be able to speak or vote. Those of you who have yellow tickets can only speak. If you have a blue ticket – congratulations – you get to discuss the issues AND make the final decision.

*Are there questions on how this exercise will work?*

*(Ideas to bring up – we are more geographically separated by voting patterns than by race, income, or ethnicity in America today)*

*(Lunch conversation)*

Okay, now that we have that out of the way, let’s begin to talk about some different issues that are also central to our national and local community.

*Let’s talk about an issue that affects young people on a day to day basis – the legal age for alcohol consumption. In each of your groups, please discuss a (very hypothetical) state measure aimed at decreasing the age of legal consumption to 19.*

Facilitate discussion, vote, and see if it changes… Talk about the numbers they would need to get this kind of thing passed, facing a much larger opposition…

*Discussion period –*

*Key questions:*

*Why are young people disinterested in the formal political process? What are the issues that are important to you? -- direct on national (war, economy, health care), state (college costs at state universities, economy), and local (smoking in public areas, mass transit system, child protective services, local roads & intersections, police and fire departments, etc.)*

*How can we make politicians listen to young people?*

*How can we help young people to feel engaged in the process and involve them in meaningful ways?*