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Authors

Haselhoff, Kim
Ong, Paul M.

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FINDINGS FROM THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY (SCS)

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Southern Californians Vested in Community

INTRODUCTION

Public opinion surveys can play an important role in decision making as they gather information that complement data from standard sources such as the Decennial Census and Current Population Survey. This Fact Sheet presents findings from a recently completed survey of Southern California residents (those living in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura). Details of the survey can be found in the appendix. The information from the survey can help better inform elected officials about the public's concerns and priorities, and can also help the residents of this region gain insight into who they are as a community. In particular, the information can tell us the degree that we interact with others – with elected officials, neighbors, those we meet through volunteer work. These are all aspects of what can be considered community engagement. One key result from the survey is that a majority of Southern California residents are engaged in their community. While only one quarter of residents are highly engaged, most residents have been involved in at least one of the three activities examined here over the course of the past twelve months. It is important to note that there are constraints on certain populations that limit their level of engagement. Lower levels of education and income greatly decrease the likelihood of community engagement. Finally, while church attendance has little correlation with community engagement, the more money one has donated to non-religious organizations, the more likely he or she is to be highly engaged.

BACKGROUND

Interest in the study of community engagement has increased over the past decade, particularly with the popularity of works by Robert Putnam (see for example, *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival of the American Community*, 2000). Putnam's work describes the decline in civic engagement and community ties over the course of the last generation, and the importance of these ties for healthy communities, strong economies and strong democracy. While civic engagement refers more to political participation, community engagement

comes in many forms, including church attendance, volunteering, donating money, and attending community meetings and events. Others have noted that community engagement varies by socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Public Policy Institute of California, 2004; Social Capital Benchmark Survey, 2000). It is likely that those with a higher socioeconomic status have more social networks for participation, as well as higher levels of efficacy, which in turn promote participation. Those with a lower socioeconomic status may lack the time, networks, and even the knowledge of how to contact officials, get involved in neighborhood events, or find out about volunteer opportunities. In addition, their communities may lack institutions that promote engagement. In this Fact Sheet we look at the level of community engagement in various secular activities in Southern California, and how it can vary by demographic characteristics.

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

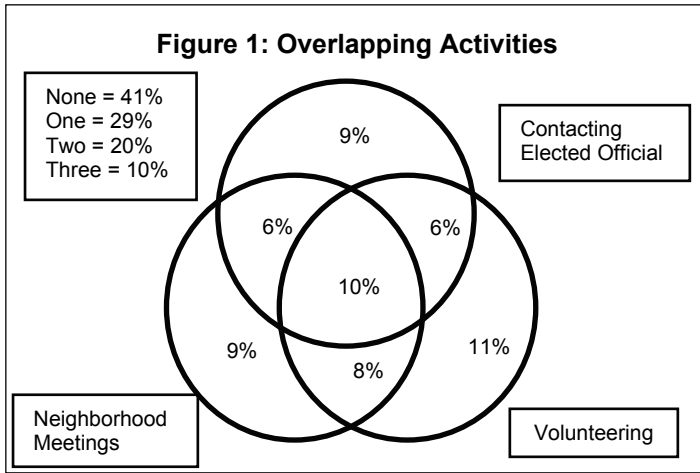
The good news is that 59 percent of Southern California residents have participated in at least one of the following three activities over the past twelve months: volunteering, contacting an elected official, or attending a neighborhood meeting. Almost 35 percent have done voluntary work, 32 percent have contacted an elected official, and 33 percent have attended a neighborhood wide meeting or event. If we compare to California as a whole, for comparison, only 28 percent of Californians have done volunteer work in the past twelve months, while 29 percent have written to an elected official, and 39 percent have attended a meeting on local or school affairs in the last year¹ (Public Policy Institute of California, 2004).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

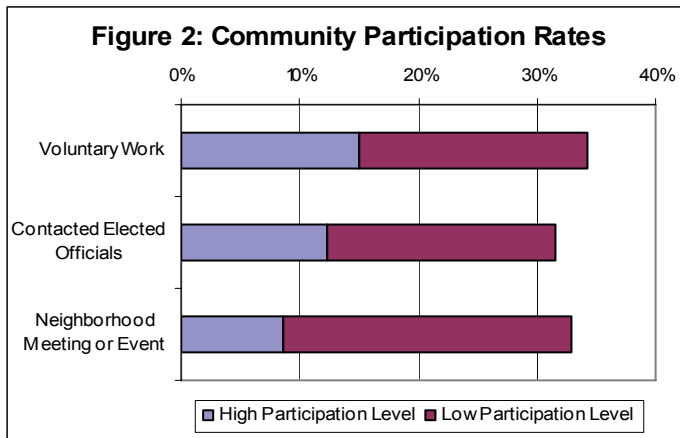
Kim Haselhoff is a post-doctoral fellow at the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies

Paul Ong is a professor in urban planning, social welfare, and Asian American studies at UCLA and Director of the Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies

The three activities are not mutually exclusive. In Southern California we also found that 30 percent of residents participate in two or more of these activities, and ten percent engaged in all three (see Figure 1).

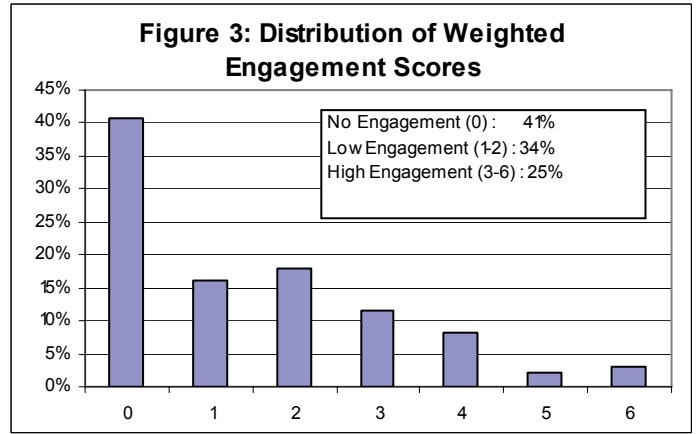


However when we distinguished between “high” and “low” participation, the engagements levels dropped by half or more (see Figure 2).



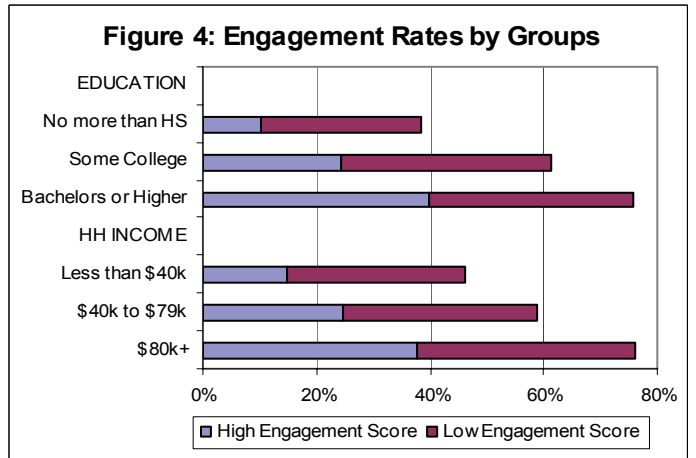
We defined “high” participation for volunteering as 40 or more hours in the past twelve months, and for contacting elected officials and attending a neighborhood meeting as at least once per quarter. The actual distribution of how “engaged” Southern Californians are can be seen in Figure 3.

The scores in Figure 3 are based on an index that takes into account the number and intensity of engagements. The initial step is determining the median level of engagement in each of the three activities. We then assigned each respondent an engagement score; a 1 if participation was below the median, and a 2 if it was above. We summed these scores for a total engagement score on a scale of 0 (no engagement) to 6 (highest engagement). A score of 1-2 was considered “low” and a score of 3-6 was considered “high.” We determined that of the 59 percent of Southern Californians who are engaged, 34 percent are considered “low” engagement, and 25 percent are considered “high” engagement.

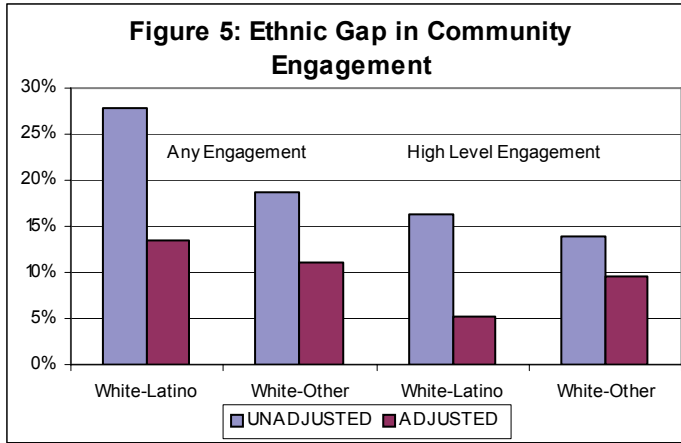


DIFFERENCES IN RATES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We looked at variations in engagement by socioeconomic groups. Our results are consistent with the results of the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, which found very different rates of social participation (and other forms of participation) among different social strata. We found that while only ten percent of those with a high school education or less received a high engagement score, 40 percent of those with a Bachelors or higher are highly engaged (see Figure 4).

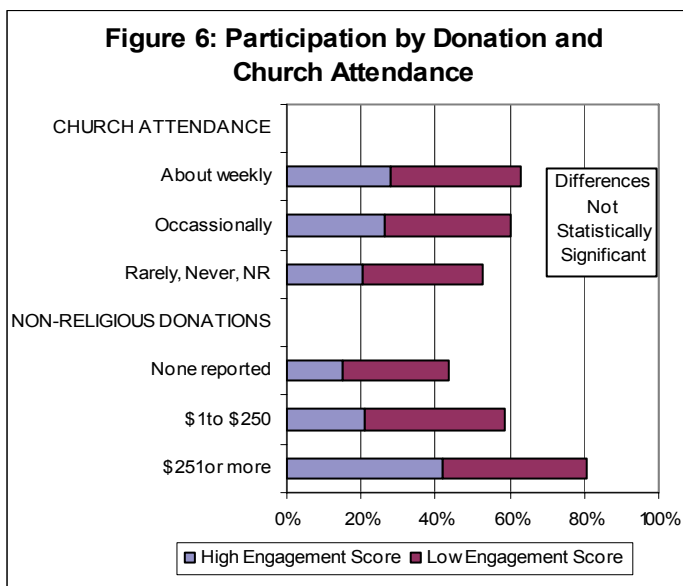


Results are similar for income. Those making more than \$80,000 per year are two and half times as likely to be highly engaged as those making less than \$40,000. High engagement, as well as engagement in general, increases as education and income increase. Whites are also much more engaged than other ethnic groups. However, when we adjust for the socioeconomic differences between whites and other groups, the differences decrease significantly (see Figure 5). The differences in engagement between whites and Latinos dropped by half when adjusting for these differences, and by two thirds when looking only at high engagement. The gap between whites and other groups², while not as large, also dropped significantly after adjusting for SES.



ENGAGEMENT AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE, DONATIONS

Finally, we examined community engagement levels by church attendance and non-religious donations (also forms of community engagement) to see if these activities substitute, complement, or are independent of each other. We found no statistically significant difference in engagement levels between those who attend church regularly and those who attend rarely or not at all (see Figure 6). These two activities operate independently of each other. However, among those who donate to non-religious organizations, there is a substantial difference in participation rates. Those who donated \$251 or more to a non-religious organization over the past twelve months were almost twice as likely to be engaged, and more than twice as likely to be highly engaged, than those who donated nothing at all. So donating money does not just substitute for time spent in community activities, but actually indicates a higher level of engagement in general.



APPENDIX: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY, 2005

The 2005 Southern California Public Opinion Survey is supported by the UCLA Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and is designed to gather the views and opinions of Southern California residents on critical public policy issues in this region. The survey was developed with input from the campus and community organizations. UCLA units include the Center for Communications and Community, the Institute of Transportation Studies, the Center for Civil Society, and the Anderson School of Management. Three public agencies participated in the process, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC). Several UCLA faculty provided valuable input: Professors Vickie Mays, Michael Stoll, Brian Taylor, Amy Zegart, Frank Gilliam, Helmut Anheier, Chris Thornberg, and Ed Leamer.

The 2005 Survey gathered basic demographic data and covered seven topical areas: 1) major issues facing the region, 2) the efficacy of local government, 3) transportation, 4) the state of the regional economy, 5) housing, 6) civic engagement, and 7) major disasters. When possible, questions were worded to parallel existing questions from other surveys. Half of the respondents were asked questions related to community engagement.

The Survey was conducted in English and Spanish during the months of January and February 2005 using random digit dialing, and the data were collected by The Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton. There are 1544 completed surveys for the five counties: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. The sample is divided proportionally by county household population. The characteristics of the sample by age, ethnicity, income and home ownership categories are consistent with the 2004 March Current Population Survey. There is a sampling error of +/- 2.6 percent at the 95 percent confidence level for the full sample, and +/- 3.7 percent for the subsample answering the questions related to community engagement. (Sampling error may be larger for subpopulations).

¹ Our question on contacting an elected official specifically included email and phone, while the question they cited did not. Their question on meetings also specified local or school affairs, while ours only asked about "neighborhood-wide" meetings or events.

² "Other" includes Asians, African-Americans, and mixed ethnicities, as well as respondents who did not indicate their ethnicity on the survey.

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DISCLAIMER

Neither the University of California, the School of Public Affairs nor the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies either support or disavow the findings in any project, report, paper, or research listed herein. University affiliations are for identification only; the University is not involved in or responsible for the project.

The **Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies** was established to promote the study, understanding and solution of regional policy issues, with special reference to Southern California, including problems of the environment, urban design, housing, community and neighborhood dynamics, transportation and economic development. It is a focus of interdisciplinary activities, involving numerous faculty members and graduate students from many schools and departments at UCLA. It also fosters links with researchers at other California universities and research institutes on issues of relevance to regional policy. Founded in 1988 with a \$5 million endowment from Ralph and Goldy Lewis, it was directed until December 1994 by Professor Allen J. Scott, directed by Roger Waldinger from 1994 through 1998 and is currently directed by Paul Ong. The Center is supported by its endowment, other private donors and foundations and research grants from a variety of agencies. The director works with an executive committee, with guidance from an advisory board that includes members drawn from both the University and the wider community.

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