



RESEARCH BRIEF

Changing The Frame: Civic Engagement Through A Racial Equity Lens Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy | August 2022

A new analysis by the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago applies a racial and ethnic equity lens to capture a broader analysis of civic life.

Traditional measures of civic engagement recognize people using their right to vote or donating their time, money, or labor for the greater good of the community. While these acts contribute to our social fabric, they are not the only ways people engage in civic action, particularly communities of color.

Changing The Frame: Civic Engagement Through A Racial Equity Lens counters the perception of declining civic participation in Chicago by taking into account the way Black, Latinx, and working-class people engage in their communities, from helping their neighbors to organizing civic action.

According to the analysis, race and class differences in civic engagement disappear or reverse when including a wide range of less formal activities and forms of collective organizing practiced among Black, Latinx, and working-class people in Chicago. The study also finds racial inequities and the practices and policies that reinforce them shape how Black and Latinx communities choose to engage in civic participation.

The report's key findings include the following:

- **Racial disparities in civic engagement can partially be understood as a consequence of data collection.**

The U.S. Census Current Population Survey, a prominent survey used to measure civic engagement, defines volunteering narrowly, creating a bias against counting volunteering activities that are disproportionately practiced by Black, Latinx, and working-class people, such as informal support networks or public meetings attendance.

- **What is or is not included in definitions of civic engagement can have significant consequences on patterns of racial disparities.**

For example, if the Current Population Survey considered attending public meetings a form of volunteering, racial gaps in volunteering rates would diminish or even reverse. The white-Black gap would shrink from 11.9 percentage points to 2.6 percentage points. The white-Latinx gap would reverse from 12.3 percentage points to a negative 1.6 percentage point gap.

• **Black and Latinx communities in Chicago have disproportionately experienced the adverse effects of a range of public policies that increase residents' sense of marginalization and create barriers to civic engagement.** These include school and mental health clinic closures, layoffs in public sector employment, long-term disinvestment, and punitive policing.

• **Despite structural barriers to civic engagement, interviews with grassroots community organizers and analysis of nonprofits in Chicago offer evidence of widespread community investment.** Whereas the U.S. Census data showed declining rates of volunteering in Chicago between 2010 and 2019, an Internal Revenue Service data analysis shows a significant increase in the number of new tax-exempt nonprofits in Chicago during that time.

• **Including a more comprehensive array of measures of civic engagement challenges the often-repeated perspective that people of color and working-class people are disengaged or don't care about their communities.** The report documents broad patterns of engagement that suggest many Chicagoans are creative and deliberate political actors working to help their communities and advance the public good.

Changing the Frame also recommends ways to inspire civic action.

• **Civic engagement metrics need to pay attention to how seeking justice and racial equity drives the civic participation of Black and Latinx communities.** As the report shows, there is extensive evidence of activities that are not counted.

• **Public institutions often fail to see the public as partners in finding solutions to the city's problems.** Investing in community organizations and local movements that can rebuild trust between the public and government agencies is one of the most important ways to protect and strengthen the vitality of democracy in Chicago.

• **Government officials and politicians looking to increase voting in Chicago's Black and Latinx communities should prioritize policies that address the root causes of inequities in communities of color.** Addressing inequities in employment, education, housing, health, and community safety will increase confidence in government effectiveness, heal civic trauma, and encourage greater voter participation in Black and Latinx communities.

Recognizing the civic participation happening within Black and Latinx communities is essential as there is a correlation between political education and voter turnout. Continuing to advocate for a changing conception of civic duty will establish an accurate representation of civic health here in Chicago. The Trust believes in civic health as a foundational element in our work to close the racial and ethnic wealth gap.

In 2019, The Chicago Community Trust committed to a 10-year strategic focus on closing the Chicago region's racial and ethnic wealth gap. The Trust funded the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy's study, *Changing The Frame: Civic Engagement Through A Racial Equity Lens*, and prepared this research brief as a part of its work to build collective power.

Visit the Institute's website at irpp.uic.edu to download the complete report.

Learn more about the Trust's wealth gap strategy at cct.org.