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## Youths' Civic Engagement Seen to Rise

By Debra Viadero

San Diego

The good news, according to researchers presenting findings here last week, is that after waning for years, civic participation among young people appears to be on the rise.

The bad news is that students who are members of racial or ethnic minorities, who live in poor neighborhoods, or who are tracked into low-achieving classes get fewer opportunities to exercise their civic muscles than their better-off peers.

The mixed findings comes from research presented April 15 during the annual meeting of the **American Educational Research Association**, a Washington-based group with 25,000 members.

The scholars said studies have documented a steady rise this decade in the percentages of young people who vote in primaries and general elections.

The percentage of 18- to 29-year-olds who voted in national elections, for example, rose from 37 percent in 1996 to 52 percent in 2008, according to Joseph E. Kahne, an education professor at Mills College, in Oakland, Calif. And, in some states, such as Georgia and Iowa, the youth vote in presidential primaries tripled over the same period.

Statistics also show that a majority of young people report having spent some time volunteering while in high school—and doing so at much higher rates than their parents ever did.

"And the number-one predictor of volunteering for students is whether anybody ever asks them," Mr. Kahne added.

Still, many disadvantaged and low-achieving students never get "asked" to take part in volunteer or civic-learning opportunities in their schools, according to Mr. Kahne's research, as well as some other studies.

### Life Imitates School

That's important to know, he said, because students are more likely to be active in civic and political life after they leave school if they take part during their school years in civic education activities. Those experiences include service-learning opportunities, debates, classroom simulations of civic processes such as mock trials and elections, volunteer activities, and classroom discussions of current events.

"Classroom-based activities have a statistically significant impact on students' civic and political involvement and their intent to vote," Mr. Kahne said. "What you do in school is strongly related to what you do in life."

Mr. Kahne and his research partner, Ellen E. Middaugh of the University of

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California, Berkeley, base their findings on an ongoing study of more than 2,500 former high school students from 19 California school districts.

The researchers periodically surveyed the students between 2005, when the young people were juniors and seniors, and late 2008, following the November presidential election.

While the results are preliminary, they point to an "opportunity gap" that translates later on to gaps in young people's rates of involvement in civic and political life.

For example, 80 percent of the students in Advanced Placement government classes said they had taken part in simulations of civic processes—an activity that has been linked to later civic participation—compared with only 51 percent of the students in lower-track government classes.

Peter Levine, a research scholar at the University of Maryland College Park's Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, said his review of the research points to some of the same trends in unequal rates of political participation among young people and adults.

Young people and adults with some college education, for example, are far more likely to be politically active than those with no college education.

Mr. Levine said one reason that higher percentages of young people voted or volunteered in the most recent national election was that they were directly contacted by President Barack Obama's campaign.

Many of those contacts came through the campaign's use of Web sites and social media to solicit young people's support, other scholars at the meeting noted.

"The lesson is that asking young people ... to contribute in a positive way can be an effective way to get them involved," Mr. Levine said.

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