

Chapter 9

Let the Sun Shine In: Promoting Civic Engagement with Sunshine Week

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ABSTRACT

Sunshine Week is a national effort to promote the importance of open government and freedom of information. Although originally begun as a news media initiative, it has grown to include community groups, libraries, schools, governments, and others who are committed to civic engagement and access to information. For academic libraries, Sunshine Week offers opportunities to forge collaborations with campus and community partners, and to connect programming with broader student learning goals. This chapter makes the case for Sunshine Week as a mechanism for bringing together campus and community groups around issues of common concern, either as a standalone effort or part of a broader program focusing on civic engagement. It features a partnership between the library, journalism program, and donors at New Mexico State University but includes ideas and resources that are transferable to other settings.

INTRODUCTION

A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce, or a Tragedy; or perhaps both. –James Madison

The foundation of a strong democracy is an informed citizenry. This can only occur when citizens have access to information about their government, including information about the actions of public officials and bodies. Sunshine Week, one of several civic initiatives emerging since 2000, promotes democracy and an engaged citizenry by championing public access to government records.

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The roughly three decades prior to 2000 revealed disturbing patterns in American civic life. The Index of National Civic Health documented steady and negative trends in Americans' political involvement, social engagement, and trust in government in the period between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s (National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998). Disengagement was particularly pronounced among younger people with annual surveys of college freshmen showing declines in measures including participation in political discussions, political awareness, and involvement in the political process (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995).

Perhaps no work captured the concern about civic disengagement more than Robert Putnam's 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Building upon other studies, Putnam documented a decline in Americans' involvement with their communities and their government over several decades. Whether examining trends in club participation, voting behavior, civic knowledge, or simply socializing with neighbors, Putnam found evidence that Americans were increasingly detached individuals who were "bowling alone" instead of connecting with each other. Putnam looked back at the bond shared by previous generations who had experienced the Second World War and wondered if community engagement would only again be sparked "by a palpable national crisis like war or depression or natural disaster..." (p. 242). One year after the book's publication, the 9/11 attacks occurred.

Researchers seeking to understand the impact of September 11 on American attitudes and behaviors have undertaken studies examining changes in beliefs and actions before and after the events. Young people have been a population of particular interest. Nancy Lange's (2002) survey of Michigan State University students found notable increases in student awareness of the connections between their personal lives and broader political and world affairs in the immediate period following the events. Another study begun by University of Texas professor Patricia Somers found young adults reporting greater interest in world affairs and a desire to connect with others in a community (reported in Randall, 2005). Putnam (2002) reported positive shifts in civic attitudes and behaviors based on survey data from 2000 and 2001, with particularly strong upward trends for younger Americans. Sander and Putnam (2010) found indicators of resurgence in civic activity, particularly among young adults, as revealed through volunteerism, expressions of political interest, involvement with political discussions, voting behavior, and participation in political campaigns. There are caveats and disagreements about the role of September 11 in influencing changes in civic behavior (Sax, 2004). Individual markers of civic engagement have also not all shown the same patterns of increase or decline (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). Nevertheless, the beginning of the 2000s is seen as a time when civic interest and participation appeared to rebound from a state of decline with at least some lasting effects.

Sunshine Week is one of several national initiatives that began around 2000 with the aim of fostering increased civic awareness and engagement. Though Sunshine Week is the focus of this chapter, related efforts such as Constitution Day and the September Project will also be reviewed to illustrate approaches to strengthening library involvement with civic engagement efforts.

BACKGROUND

Sunshine Week began in 2002 as "Sunshine Sunday" when the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors raised alarms about state legislation seeking multiple exemptions to Florida's public records laws. Florida's journalists began reporting on the legislation's potential impact on citizen access to government information and many of the proposed exemptions were subsequently defeated (Florida Society of Newspaper

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