

Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Civic engagement is usually measured as a set of concrete activities, from voting to protesting, that individuals undertake in order to sustain or improve their communities. Higher rates of civic engagement generally correlate with desirable social outcomes. Education and socioeconomic status predict whether individuals participate, but programs that recruit and organize disadvantaged people are effective at boosting their civic engagement. Although it is valuable to know the causes and consequences of these behaviors, the ideal of civic engagement is intrinsically normative, connected to basic debates about what constitutes a *good* society and a *meaningful* human life. In the future, civic engagement research should not only be an empirical investigation into concrete behaviors but also a reorientation of research throughout the liberal arts to serve civic ends. That will require more fruitful combinations of empirical, normative, and strategic thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement means all the ways that members of a community act to define its goals and norms, to sustain and reform its institutions, and to produce public goods. It is usually measured as a set of concrete behaviors, such as voting, attending meetings, following the news, belonging to voluntary groups, and volunteering. It can be defined in a value-neutral way, so that Mussolini's Blackshirt paramilitaries were as civically engaged as the Freedom Riders of the American Civil Rights Movement. But more often, the word "civic" gives the whole phrase a positive moral valence, and certain norms are built into the definition and measures of civic engagement. For example, civically engaged people may be defined as those who deliberate respectfully with fellow members of their community and act voluntarily to sustain a democratic political system. Because the phrase involves values, its definition is perennially controversial.

Much of the available research is quantitative and explores who is civically engaged, how levels of engagement have changed over time, what causes people to engage, and what consequences follow from engagement. There

are debates about all of these questions, but substantial evidence suggest that the traditional forms of engagement are in decline in the United States and most other wealthy democracies, and the new forms (such as online groups) have yet to compensate (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 2012). Civic engagement is correlated with socioeconomic advantage; poor and working-class people have lost opportunities to engage since the 1970s. Finally, the existing research shows many benefits from engagement. But the research does not yet provide sufficient guidance to people who want to be responsible and active citizens.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

The foundations of research on civic engagement are very old. In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates argues for a certain kind of civic duty and engagement, and in Plato's *Republic*, probably written somewhat later, Socrates argues that average citizens are not up to the task of being citizens and need to be led by philosopher kings. In the *Politics*, Aristotle defines a city state as an association of citizens who deliberate and judge, sharing in the administration of the polity. For Aristotle, essential acts of civic engagement include service on juries, participation in assemblies, and service in war.

The debate about whether citizens can and should engage has continued since Plato argued against democracy and Aristotle took a more positive view (albeit restricting citizenship to non-slave men). One way that the debate is organized today is as a continuum between "civic republicans" and "classical liberals." The former believe that civic engagement is a good in itself, an aspect of a fully satisfactory human life, or a necessary precondition of a just polity. Thus, if actual citizens are not very competent or virtuous, we must educate or engage them better. Important representatives of that school include John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, Benjamin Barber, Robert Bellah, Michael Sandel, Harry Boyte, and Sheldon Wolin. Few of these authors assume that actual citizens are very impressive; they argue instead for improving the citizenry. The classical liberal position, on the other hand, is skeptical of efforts to improve people—both because that may undermine personal liberty and because it will not work. This position traces back to Locke and Madison but remains current today. Classical liberals advocate relying more on procedural safeguards (such as restrictive constitutions) to achieve good political results.

Civic republicanism was revived in the 1970s and has led to a resurgence of theoretical and philosophical debates about citizenship. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has also contributed to the revival with his influential work on deliberative democracy, as did the Nobel-Prize-winner Elinor Ostrom, who studied how communities make and sustain public goods.

But just as theorists were becoming more interested in civic engagement, data suggested that Americans were engaging less. Robert Putnam's scholarly work of the 1990s, summarized in the best-selling book *Bowling Alone* (2000), set the tone for a vibrant debate in which some of the main questions are: Is it really true that civic engagement is declining, despite the rise of new online communities and new forms of association, such as self-help groups? If civic engagement is too rare or unequal, what can be done about that? For instance, is school-based civic education effective? And is civic engagement necessarily beneficial? (Surely hate-groups count as voluntary associations, yet fewer of them would be better.)

Putnam's master-term is not "civic engagement," but "social capital," defined as networks that people can draw on to solve problems (Putnam, 2011). His focus is not universal among scholars in this field. For Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, the key question is which Americans are organized to have effective influence on the government (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). For communitarians, the question is whether Americans are isolated and lonely instead of engaged with one another. Still other authors have been concerned about political polarization and want to see more deliberation among diverse citizens. In short, the debate is not just about trends and correlations but also about what matters most. Civic engagement is intertwined with other terms, such as community, participation, membership, deliberation, public work, the public sphere, civil society, the commons, and social capital, none of which is perfectly coterminous with any of the others.

Research that investigates the reasons for civic engagement usually finds that it is strongly correlated with education and socioeconomic status, so that inequality of engagement is a substantial problem. Education may confer skills and ideas that lead people to engage and also work as a proxy for socioeconomic advantage. Civic engagement also varies both in quantity and form by demographic group. For example, strong traditions of civic engagement among African Americans mean that voting and membership rates are often as high for Blacks as for Whites, despite lower mean levels of education and wealth. African-Americans also tend to engage in different ways, with a strong contribution from politically conscious churches. That is just one example of a demographic/cultural difference.

General educational attainment is correlated with civic engagement, but a narrower question is whether specific educational programs can boost civic engagement in a lasting way. Most scholars from the 1960s through the 1980s doubted that civic education had much impact, but more recent studies find substantial benefits from courses in civics as well as extracurricular programs, community service, and school policies that encourage constructive participation by students.

This essay focuses on the United States, but the literature is global. The United States traditionally has among the highest levels of engagement, leaving aside voter turnout, on which the United States ranks very low. However, membership rates have long been always higher in the Nordic democracies than in the United States, and some countries in the Global South are notable both for high levels of engagement and for influential innovations, such as the “Participatory Budgeting” processes that originated in Brazil and the very strong village council or Gram Sabha system in India. Those are examples of official policy reforms that lead to more civic engagement. In some countries, notably India, socioeconomic status is not correlated with civic engagement, as it is the United States.

Research often finds benefits from civic engagement, albeit defined variously in different studies. For individuals, being engaged civically is often found to confer skills, enhance motivation and satisfaction, and strengthen networks. Thus, it is associated with lower rates of depression, better school performance for adolescents, and better physical health. In politics, people who engage have more power and influence. Finally, communities seem to thrive better if more of their citizens are engaged.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Much of the debate prompted by authors like Putnam and Verba, Shlozman, and Brady has used surveys of populations to measure levels of engagement. The typical questions—such as “How many groups do you belong to?”—are probably proxy measures for what really matters, which is the structure of the working relationships in a community. That structure can be understood as a network, with individuals and institutions as nodes, and relationships as links. Authors like Robert Sampson and Sean Safford are using network analysis to reveal what really matters for social outcomes (Safford, 2009; Sampson, 2012).

Because civic engagement is strongly correlated with a host of desirable factors, it has traditionally been hard to know what causes it. For example, education may boost engagement, or the reverse may be true, or they may be correlated because both reflect socioeconomic advantage. Increasingly, randomized field experiments have been used to test the impact of efforts to enhance engagement. Randomized experiments helped show, for example, that it is not difficult to persuade young people to vote. On the other hand, Sampson argues that randomized studies of individuals have severe limitations for understanding effects that arise at the community level, including the effects of “collective efficacy” in neighborhoods. (Collective efficacy is closely related to civic engagement.)

Governments and other large institutions can either frustrate or encourage civic engagement, and some cutting-edge research asks what particular tools and strategies are most effective if governments want to strengthen participation.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Most research on civic engagement, like most academic research in general, is rather impersonal. The key questions are who engages, why, and with what consequences? The scholar is looking out on a population and asking questions about it. But imagine that you are an individual who wants to improve the world. It may not matter to you if people in your situation typically do, or do not, engage. You want to know *how* to engage in order to make things better.

Empirical evidence, such as that summarized earlier, is relevant. It is helpful to know, for example, that civic education programs can enhance civic engagement. But empirical evidence does not suffice, because you (as a would-be active citizen) also need two other things: strategic guidance about how to change the world, and ethical guidance about which means and which ends are best. These matters are closely integrated. For instance, an excellent goal is of no value if the only means to attain that goal are harmful.

Thus, the research that is most urgently needed would combine philosophical, strategic, and empirical questions. It would be addressed to individuals but would not presume that individuals can address social problems by themselves, so an important question would be: How can you get other people and institutions to work with you to improve the world? This is not so much research about civic engagement as research that improves civic engagement.

Barriers to this kind of research are substantial. Pervasive positivism in the social sciences separates facts from values, and treats the latter as subjective opinions rather than assertions that can be vindicated. Disciplines such as philosophy, political theory, and theology that address matters of value are rarely concerned with strategy.

There is no coherent framework for research or education for citizenship. In certain professional occupations, facts, values, and strategies are fruitfully combined. For instance, prospective physicians learn anatomy, professional ethics, and therapeutic techniques as part of their training. But there is no comparable curriculum or research agenda for citizens.

Finally, social science tends to find that deliberate action by citizens (“civic engagement”) has modest effects on social and political outcomes. For example, citizens’ involvement with schools improves educational performance, but it is not the most important factor. Such findings limit the

amount of research conducted on civic engagement, especially in fields like macroeconomics, which tend not to take citizenship very seriously as a causal factor. Yet, a core purpose of research and education is to equip active citizens with the knowledge they need to be as effective as possible (within inevitable constraints). Doing one's best as a citizen is the most important thing we can do. Thus civic engagement should be a top priority across all disciplines. It should move from being a specialized topic of study, mainly involving surveys of people's concrete behavior, to a core purpose of the liberal arts as a whole.

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