The Civic Engagement of Young Americans: Why Does it Matter?

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To appear in a special issue on immigrants and civic engagement, in *Applied Developmental Science* (2008), edited by Network member Constance Flanagan and Lene Jensen Arnett

This special issue is devoted to the civic engagement of young immigrants in the United States. "Civic engagement" is a contested term whose definition varies depending on our conception of the good society and our beliefs about how individuals should behave. Reasonable people debate whether starting a business, raising one's younger siblings, confronting a neighbor who uses prejudiced language, enlisting in the military, resisting authority by working inefficiently, or planning an insurrection should count as "civic engagement." The authors of this volume have investigated many (but not all) unpaid, legal, and nonviolent ways of addressing social problems and issues. They give particular attention to voting, volunteering, joining associations, and holding leadership positions.

These forms of civic engagement are important because institutions and communities perform better when many people voluntarily contribute their talents, energies, and ideas (Putnam 2001). Civil society—the array of voluntary groups and networks—also checks the power of the state and reduces the likelihood of poor government and oppression. Meanwhile, engaging in politics and civic affairs influences the distribution of goods, rights, and services. Those who participate more tend to get more from the system (American Political Science Association 2004).

The benefits of participation are not merely economic and political. In order to create ambitious *cultural* products and to build demand for particular forms of culture, it is necessary to form and sustain associations. For example, it takes an organized, voluntary group to mount and advertise a live performance. Therefore, having a diverse and participatory culture depends on a thriving civil society. The alternative is homogeneous, mass-produced culture aimed at the median consumer (Tocqueville 1835/1954, vol. 2, book 3, chapter 17).

Civic engagement can be intrinsically satisfying, dignified, and worthwhile—an opportunity, not a cost (Arendt, 1958). Finally, civic engagement is a kind of arbiter of other goods. To call a community or a society successful because it has ample aggregate income, a high degree of economic equality, or a low crime rate would be presumptuous. These goods can conflict with one another, and the tradeoffs often provoke controversy. The only test of whether a society is just is whether its own members, after due deliberation and active participation, *consider* it just. Hence civic engagement cannot simply be weighed against health, welfare, security, or other social goods. It is the means by which we judge success.

The civic engagement of *young* people is especially important for several reasons. An impressive body of empirical evidence finds that adolescence and young adulthood are the "formative years," during which durable habits, attitudes, and values relevant to political participation are formed (see Sears and Levy 2003 for a summary). Therefore, the most efficient time to try to enhance engagement is probably before age 25.

Another body of research finds that those adolescents who are most engaged in service and leadership are the most likely to thrive in other aspects of life (Dávila and Mora, 2007; Lerner 2004; Zill et al 1995). They perform better in school, are healthier, and are less likely to get in trouble. Although the causal relationships are complex and contested, it seems likely that civic engagement enhances development by giving young people positive motivations, beneficial peer-networks, feelings of worth, and longer time-horizons.

In addition to these two important reasons for focusing on young people, we may also note that youth form a demographic group with its own interests that can be overlooked when youth fail to participate politically. Young adults have a fresh outlook and relatively light investment in the status quo; hence they often lead social change, as in the civil rights movement, the women's movement—but also European fascism. Finally, adolescents have at least a somewhat autonomous culture that is difficult for adults to shape; thus young people need civic skills in order to address the problems that arise within their own social networks, such as violence and drug abuse (Youniss et al 1999).

This volume concentrates on a subset of young Americans, those who have emigrated from another country, plus those who were born in the United States to immigrant parents, plus those Americans who belong to ethnic groups stereotypically seen as part of the "new" wave of arrivals after the 1965 Immigration Act: Latinos, Africans, Asians, and Arabs. The combination of these three groups can loosely be called "immigrant youth" (even though some Latinos and Asians descend from many generations of United States citizens).

As might be expected, immigrant youth resemble their non-immigrant peers in many respects. Lopez and Marcelo (this volume) find differences in the rates of participation between first-generation immigrants and native-born young people, but they are able to account for many of these differences by controlling for respondents' education, parental education, legal citizenship, and other demographic factors. Likewise, Stepick, Stepick, and Labissiere (this volume) study a population that is fairly homogeneous in terms of region and socio-economic status: first-year students at one public, four-year university in South Florida. Their sampling method essentially controls for many background variables other than country of origin. Consistent with Lopez and Marcelo, Stepick and colleagues find that immigrants and non-immigrants participate in generally similar ways and at generally similar rates.

These findings concern behavior: specifically, actions that were identified as "civic engagement" by youth in focus groups (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, and Zukin 2002). Even if being an immigrant does not affect one's chances of participating in these rather standard ways, it may encourage *other* civic behaviors, such as translating for one's parents or sending money home to one's country of origin (Stepick et al., this volume). It may provide particular *motivations* for engagement or disengagement (Jensen and Junn and Masuoka, this volume). Being an immigrant may influence the topics or purposes that young volunteers and activists select. For example, the Arab Americans studied by Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, and Flanagan (this volume) have identified anti-Arab discrimination as a common cause. Finally, an immigrant identity may cause particular events, statements, or ideas to trigger civic engagement, as when millions of young Latinos took to the streets to oppose restrictions on immigration in 2006. Junn and

Masuoka use an experimental method to show that simple prompts (images and statements) can change the attitudes of ethnic-minority respondents toward their own group—a finding that underlines the volatility of civic attitudes. Cross-sectional surveys can mislead by making attitudes seem static when they are always in development.

The articles in this volume are rich, careful studies of particular populations, and they preclude hasty generalization. Two themes, however, stand out for me. One is the power of group identity in overcoming collective-action problems. To engage civically is often irrational if one thinks in the first-person singular. Notoriously, to vote is a waste of effort when millions of others are also enfranchised, because each ballot has too little influence on the outcome (Downs 1957). Likewise, to join a service club means contributing time and money to address a problem that will only be solved if many others also participate. And if others do contribute, one's own participation is unnecessary. But civic engagement is perfectly rational if one thinks in terms of "we" rather than "I." If many Latinos vote, for example, there may be tangible, positive consequences for all Latinos. An ethnic minority may develop a sense of "we" because of shared grievances, linked fate, ethnic pride, or common religious or cultural values. Group identity is a construction that can develop in various ways depending on the context. For example, one's Lebanese background plus a particular political situation or prompt could cause one to identify as Lebanese, Arab, Moslem, Middle-Eastern, or American—or some combination of these (Wray-Lake et al., this volume).

The second theme is that immigrants have civic assets because they "are not only bilingual, but also bicultural" (Stepick et al., this volume). Many of the Salvadoran and Indian Americans in Jensen's article believe that they have acquired resources (money or psychological assets such as confidence) from living in the United States that obligate them to serve in this country and their nations of origin. For example, one Indian-American woman feels an obligation to enhance gender equality in India, based on her experience in the United States. Contrary to Samuel Huntington's worry that immigrants have divided loyalties and inadequate commitment to America, some of the migrants in Jensen's study try to enhance the "soft power" of the United States by voluntarily exporting ideals that they consider American (Nye 2004).

CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) is proud to have funded the research of Jensen, of Junn, and of Stepick, Stepick and Labissiere that appears in this volume. Lopez and Marcelo contributed their article as members of CIRCLE's staff, analyzing a national survey that CIRCLE conducted in 2006. CIRCLE will subsidize the publication of this special issue of *Applied Developmental Science.* All this activity was made possible by a grant to CIRCLE from The Pew Charitable Trusts. We are grateful for that support, which has allowed distinguished scholars to make considerable headway on a crucial topic.

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