



Young People's Civic
Engagement and Political
Development

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Scholarly interest in youth and politics has waxed and waned with the times. Voting in elections is a major dependent variable in political science. Since age determines eligibility and since lower numbers of youth tend to vote, they have often been ignored. The intersection of youth and politics gets attention when concerns about the younger generation's political interest and commitments intensify. Trends pointing to declines in conventional forms of engagement in younger generations has spurred today's interest. In any era, 18 – 25 year olds are less likely than their elders to vote, to belong to political parties, or to read newspapers. However, young people today are also less likely than earlier generations of youth to get engaged in these ways (Levine, 2007).

As scholarly attention has increased, the definition of civic engagement has expanded. In this chapter, the terms civic and political are used interchangeably based on the equivalence of the terms in the political theorist, Michael Walzer's (1989) definition:

A citizen is, most simply, a member of a political community, entitled to whatever prerogatives and encumbered with whatever responsibilities are attached to membership. The word comes to us from the Latin *civis*; the Greek equivalent is *polites*, member of the polis, from which comes our political (p. 211).

This is a useful way to conceptualize citizenship with a decidedly 'youth' lens. In the context of their experiences of membership in local groups, institutions, and organizations, youth practice citizenship. In such contexts they learn what it means to be a member of a group, to exercise rights, have a say in the group's affairs, and learn to be accountable to fellow members and to the mission of the organization (Flanagan, 2004). By working toward a common goal, they also learn to be agents of social change.

Why focus on youth?

Psychological and sociological theorists consider youth a politically definitive period. This is a time in life for deciding about the direction of one's future. In the process, an individual tends to take stock of him/herself and his/her society. Whereas childhood and early adolescence tends to be highly structured, the transition to adulthood is marked by the young person's greater self determination and independence of thought. Consequently, the political views of younger generations are rarely carbon copies of their parents'.

Erikson (1968) captured the developmental imperatives that youth face when he described the key psychosocial tasks of these years as exploring and consolidating an identity. This entails seeking purpose, deciding on beliefs and commitments, and linking to others (in organizations, religious traditions, or social causes) who share such commitments. Developing an ideology enables youth to organize and manage the vast array of choices the world presents. Political ideologies are forming in adolescence when personal values, world views, and political attributions appear to be highly concordant (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999).

Identity theorists extol the benefits for youth of a moratorium on social roles and commitments (Arnett, 2000). Compared to older adults, youth are ‘free’ to explore different perspectives on social issues and different possible selves. Politically, they should be more independent than their elders, undecided about party affiliation, and more open to joining alternative (e.g., Green) parties. However, freedom from role and other social constraints is not, in itself, enough to motivate exploration and consolidation of political identities. At least two other factors are important. First, one also needs exposure to heterogeneous points of view. The classic case for the impact of new reference groups on the evolving political views of young adults was documented in Newcomb's longitudinal studies of women attending Bennington College in the 1930's. Exposure to progressive faculty perspectives on public issues--which departed from their parents' conservative convictions--was related to a shift in the women's positions towards greater identification with the policies of the New Deal, a political shift that lasted into their retirement years (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991).

Second, the freedom of youth may be wasted politically, if there are no pressures (whether historical or contextual) that motivate youth to grapple with social issues and take a stand. In this regard, Jennings' (2002) longitudinal study of a 1965 high-school cohort points to the opportunity that the college context provided during the political heyday of the late 1960's. Compared to peers who did not attend college, those who did were more likely to grapple with diverse perspectives on issues which helped them to clarify where they stood. Differences between the groups persisted into mid-life with the college attendees remaining more consistent in their political beliefs.

Importantly, it is not the mere fact of being in college that produces civic benefits but rather the exposure to different perspectives and the pressure to come to grips with them that helps youth crystallize their own views. As social movement literature has documented, for civic engagement in one's youth to have lifelong effects, one has to actively wrestle with the issues rather than watch from the sidelines. Citizenship figures prominently in most college mission statements and, in recent years, courses with a community service component have been on the rise. At the same time, universities have enacted policies that restrict the range of backgrounds and perspectives their students will naturally encounter. For example, computer matching services to help new students find roommates who are similar to them are now common practice. To improve their ratings in outlets such as *U.S. News and World Report*, universities seek students with high standardized test scores and attract them by increasing the proportion of merit vs. need-based scholarships and providing small “honors” colleges within the larger public university.

Nonetheless, being in college (or other institutional settings such as work, faith-based organizations, etc) enhances the likelihood of recruitment into civic activity. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) show that variation in civic participation among American adults can be explained by three factors: the fact that citizens who have *resources* can be active; those who are *engaged* are motivated or want to be active; and those who are *recruited* often say yes when asked. College plays a role in at least two and perhaps all three of these: Youth with more resources are more likely to attend college; additional political contacts and resources accrue with education. A wide range of organizations, clubs, and associations also are a typical part of student life and participation in such groups has both social and civic pay-offs. Student members of organizations are likely to get recruited into some community volunteer work or political activity even if the primary purpose of their organization is social. Civic skills and dispositions may accrue as a consequence of their volunteer work. It is less clear that college attendance

impacts the motivation for civic participation. However, college attendance does seem to sustain the civic engagement of the highly motivated by offering structured opportunities for staying engaged.

Class Divide in Opportunities for Civic Participation

What are the opportunities for civic participation for youth who do not go on to four year colleges? Although education and participation have long been stubbornly linked (Verba et al., 1995), the class divide in civic participation has been growing. According to a 2006 report from the National Conference on Citizenship, those with a college education are far more likely than those with high-school diplomas to participate in a wide range of civic activities. In part, this growing divide may be due to the changing conditions associated with the transition to adulthood and the institutional lacuna for working-class and poor youth (Settersten, Furstenburg, & Rumbaut, 2005). In earlier generations, youth who did not go on to college could expect to find full-time jobs, some unionized, with a living wage. Work provided structure and social connections; many young adults started families and set down roots in communities. Thus, the non-college bound had several institutions (work, union, family) that provided structured opportunities (resources and recruitment) for getting engaged. In contrast, today, there is an institutional lacuna for youth who do not go on to college. They are more likely to be 'on their own' to identify opportunities both for personal achievement and for civic engagement. And what may pass as exploration may, in fact, reflect floundering in the absence of guidance or mentoring. Trends in North America and Europe indicate that there are growing numbers of late adolescents and early adults who are not connected to society via training, school, or work.

Inequalities in opportunities for civic engagement exist well before the young adult years. In poor communities, schools offer fewer extracurricular and service learning activities and communities offer fewer organized activities. The ratio of children to adults is much higher in resource-stressed communities (Hart & Atkins, 2002). As a result, there is a smaller pool of the adult volunteers on which community based youth organizations depend. In addition, young people are less likely to learn ways that citizens can get the system to work for them since their communities have fewer ties to public officials, less political clout, and fewer vibrant civic associations where public actions can be organized.

Nonetheless, there is a growing body of applied research and practice documenting youth activist projects in marginalized communities (see summaries in Sherrod, Flanagan, Kassimir, & Syvertsen, 2005). These projects harness young people's frustrations and direct their anger toward social change, often targeting basic needs for textbooks and transportation or tolerance in schools and communities. Political skills are gained as youth gather information and critically analyze issues, including the political/power dynamics that underlie them and, ultimately learn how to speak out on behalf of their group. Through such venues, they interpret the meaning of citizenship and understand their role as agents of change.

An institutional setting is one context in which political views and identities take shape. Historical context is another. If youth is a politically definitive time in the life course, then the historical events of the period when one comes of age provide fodder for political growth. In fact, historical events that occur during one's youth have a greater formative influence than those same events occurring in one's adulthood. The intersection of historical era with developmental timing has been the focus of sociologists and political scientists in the tradition of generational theory. Proponents of this theory point out that, as increasing numbers of the younger generations replace the declining numbers of their elders in society, the political landscape is

bound to change (Delli Carpini, 1989). The amount of political stability vs. political change is determined in part by the degree to which the younger generation adopts the views of their elders or crafts a distinct generational perspective. Thus, focusing on ways that younger generations negotiate salient social issues provides a lens on the future political landscape. Drawing from Mannheim (1952), generational theorists contend that younger generations have a "fresh contact" with their society, i.e., they see (objectively) similar issues and events from a perspective distinct from adults.

Stewart and McDermott (2004) argue that different forms of political engagement (e.g., conventional vs. protest politics) and the amount of political continuity or change they portend are shaped by different generations' relative tendency to identify horizontally (with peers) or vertically with the parents' generation. If the period of one's youth intersects with a historical time of social discontinuity, it increases within generation identification. For example, in South Africa activists in the Black Consciousness and Young Lions generations united around the cause of fighting apartheid. In today's democratic South Africa, activists in the younger generation are more likely to participate through intergenerational venues such as religious, traditional, and indigenous organizations.

In contrast to the theme of social change which tends to dominate generational replacement theories, socialization theory concentrates on intergenerational continuity, arguing that adult agents pass on to the younger generation a set of principles that sustain the system. An affective attachment to the political principles that sustain the system was thought to develop via the young person's sense of political efficacy, i.e., their sense that when people like them spoke, political authorities paid attention (Easton & Dennis, 1969). Less attention was given to politics as a contestation of power or to the development of political consciousness in marginalized groups. Socialization theory also is less compelling in contexts of rapid social change when there is considerable discontinuity between the principles that organized society during the parents' formative years and the principles that dominate as their children come of age. For example, in Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990's, the rapid pace of change from command to market economies and from single party to multi-party rule meant that the habits and practices of the parents' generation were poor guides for the political realities that their children faced.

Opportunities for civic practice

Participation in organizations in one's youth is a precursor to civic engagement in adulthood. However, opportunities for engagement vary by age and class. In their national, longitudinal study following a 1965 high-school cohort into mid-life, Jennings and Stoker (2004) point to precipitous declines in civic engagement after youth graduate from high-school. As explanation, they contrast the highly structured opportunities and norms for engagement in the high school setting with the greater dependence on individual initiative to find and join organizations in early adulthood.

Engagement in extracurricular and community-based organizations in adolescence does predict civic engagement in adulthood (Verba et al., 1995) but all organizations are not equal in this regard. In their analysis of two national longitudinal U.S. data sets, McFarland and Thomas (2006) report that involvement as a youth in voluntary associations that entail community service, public speaking, debate, and performance, and religious affiliations are the strongest predictors of political involvement in young adulthood. After controlling for multiple social background and selection factors, they conclude that "youth organizations that demand time

commitments and that concern service, political activity, and public performance have the most significant positive relation to long-term political participation” (p. 416).

The mechanisms underlying the long-term civic impact of organizational involvement in one’s youth are not well delineated but several come to mind. First is a selection effect: Joiners in youth become joiners in adulthood. As research on voluntarism suggests, their personalities may differ: Volunteers are more likely than non-volunteers to exhibit positive emotions and social skills including openness, agreeableness, and extraversion (Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2007). Second, once in an organization, an individual is likely to get recruited into other organizations and civic activities (Verba et al., 1995). Thus, engagement as a youth sets one on a recruitment trajectory, i.e., involvement in one group increases the likelihood of recruitment into others.

Third, although social rewards are the reason most youth initially join organizations, over time they are likely to develop an affinity and identification with the organization and its mission, and feel a sense of coherence between their own values and views and those of others in the organization (Erikson, 1968). The public or collective identity they are forging is a necessary foundation for sustained civic action insofar as such action benefits the community, not just the self. We are more likely to forego individual gain on behalf of the good of a group if we feel a sense of solidarity with the group.

Solidarity or identification with a group or organization is related to a fourth reason why organizational engagement in youth is related to civic engagement in adulthood. By working with a group to achieve a goal, particularly if they succeed, they may experience a sense of collective efficacy, i.e., a belief in the capacity of the group to achieve something together. Since political goals are typically achieved through collective action, this is an important constituent for sustaining their engagement.

Forms of Youth Political Activism

Youth may be less likely than their elders to engage in conventional politics. But they are more likely to act on their beliefs in unconventional ways through public demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, or even more disruptive forms of political action. Social movements literature has regularly documented the inverse relationship between age and the choice of militant strategies that may pose personal risks. Often, this has resulted in public and media derision and dismissal both of the message and of the youth. However, youths’ impatience and penchant for militant action has invigorated organizations and political movements. In the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, it was the militancy of youth that rejuvenated the African National Congress. Likewise, the willingness of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to get arrested for acts of civil disobedience against segregation revitalized more mainstream Civil Rights organizations in the United States.

Contemporary studies also document how mainstream community organizations (e.g., 4-H) are reinvigorated when youths’ perspectives are taken seriously. Across communities in the United States, young people are assuming leadership roles in public policy consultation, community coalitions for youth development, and non-profit organizations. These models reflect a new focus on positive youth development which frames youth as assets rather than risks to their communities (see entries in Sherrod et al., 2005). They also necessitate a new partnering style between the youth and adults in the organization. It is also noteworthy that several contemporary models of job and life skills training incorporate civic engagement as an integral element of training. Programs such as Youth Build, Youth ChalleNGe, AmeriCorps, and Youth

Corps combine education, job skills training, and volunteer service. Consequently, youth have first-hand experience of the contributions they can make and the ways their training can be put to use.

Perhaps the biggest increase in youth civic engagement has occurred as a consequence of the institutionalization of community service/service learning in secondary and post-secondary education. In the United States, the past two decades have seen an exponential increase in the number of service learning courses offered in high schools with some cities and states mandating a specified number of community service hours as a graduation requirement. Although program quality varies, the ideal is that students engage in meaningful (rather than functional) work that addresses real community needs in projects that are sustained over time, and that they connect their experiences back to classroom learning. Research indicates that, even when mandated, engaging in quality service results in a growth in students' civic skills, democratic dispositions, and sense of efficacy in addressing community issues. Criticisms of the trends in service learning as a form of civic engagement contend that, direct service in the absence of discussions about the underlying cause of public problems and policy options to address those problems, may divert youth toward charity and away from political action.

Similar trends in community engagement have occurred in colleges and universities where creative experiments in public scholarship and service learning emphasize the reciprocity between learning in the classroom and the community. These models of education emphasize its civic purpose and imply that it is myopic to focus only on credentializing students for the job market: Preparing youth for the responsibilities of adulthood also means enabling them to assume their roles as citizens. Indeed, as the job market becomes less predictable and the nature of jobs more episodic, the centrality of work to identity may be changing. Civic identity and the purpose and sense of community derived from it may take on added meaning in the life narratives of younger generations.

Increasingly political issues transcend the borders of states and many new forms of youth activism reflect this transnational reality. Both the causes (e.g., workers' rights in sweatshops) and the methods (networking with IT) are transnational in their reach. Activists focus on justice in labor, environmental, and procedural practices and underscore the lack of accountability of new multi-national entities (the WTO, G8, or World Bank) to the people affected by their policies. Organizations such as the World Social Forum provide alternative images of a world other than the one these multi-national entities portend.

Organizational styles reflect a new politics as well. In contrast to the centralized, hierarchical structures of political parties or labor unions, horizontal, loose networks with flexible membership and dispersed leadership are more typical. The new youth politics takes advantage of the democratic potential of new media to share information, increase diversity of opinion, and to mobilize political actions. To date, social networking, virtual worlds, and gaming have largely been used for social and consumer purposes but time will tell how creative youth may be in exploiting their political potential.

The protracted period of 'youth' and the global space of their lives should motivate renewed attention to the civic engagement theme, including a critical look at the received wisdom about the developmental processes, forms, and timing of political identity formation. First, younger generations may take longer than in the past to explore political issues before deciding where they stand. The lower voting rates of today's 18-25 year olds may be less troubling if they catch up by age 30. Second, there may be life long civic benefits to an extended moratorium on social roles if youth get engaged and wrestle with public problems during these

years. Of course, this implies a policy shift toward more programs in local and national service. Engaging in such work at a time when individuals are constituting their identities should inculcate a civic ethic well into the retirement years.

Third, the changing structure of work and declines in union membership have resulted in a growing class divide in civic participation and an institutional lacuna for working-class youth. Models of job training that include civic service hold promise but more creativity is needed to insure all young people have equal opportunities for civic practice. Fourth, migration of people from the developing to the developed world raises questions about the meaning of citizenship and the protections of 'stateless' citizens.

Finally, theories of youth political development may have underestimated the value of responsibilities in the consolidation of political identities. The freedom from social roles has been extolled as a major reason why youth is a politically definitive period. But such freedom may be put to other exploratory ends (binge drinking comes to mind) in the absence of social pressures. Youth are unlikely to take a stand until the personal relevance of a political issue is clear and the relevance of many issues may only become clear with the assumption of adult roles and responsibilities.

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