

Entry: Civic Engagement
Forthcoming. "Civic Engagement." In Encyclopedia of the American High School, edited by Kathryn Borman, Spencer Cahill, and Bridget Cotner. New York: Greenwood Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

Has democracy become a spectator sport? In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that the success of American democracy could be attributed to the vibrancy of its civic life. In 2000, Robert Putnam declared that we are a nation that bowls alone: that while more and more Americans bowl, we do so as isolated individuals rather than in community bowling leagues.

Statistics seem to support this downward trend in civic engagement. Volunteerism, voter turnout, and membership in civic organizations such as book clubs, bowling leagues, and religious organizations have all dropped precipitously in the last thirty years. Moreover, today's youth (aged 15-24) are the most likely to be disengaged from public life when compared to older Americans and to young people of past generations. Citizenship, it appears, has become optional.

This is a troubling scenario for many scholars, educators, and policymakers. If a strong democracy requires engaged and knowledgeable citizens, then today's civic apathy bodes ill for our post-9/11 world. Thomas Jefferson's (1820) belief that, "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society than in the people themselves" is a deeply worrisome realization for those who believe that today's youth are much more familiar with mass media, rampant consumerism, and instant messaging than they are with the name of the vice-president of the United States.

The question remains, though, whether today's youth are truly as disinterested and cut off from the public sphere as the data suggests. For today's youth – the "DotNet" generation who have come of age in the shadow of the Internet – approach civic life in some fundamentally

different ways than past generations. Schools have also become much more involved in promoting civic engagement rather than just teaching about it. As such, the important discussion to be had is not whether civic engagement is dead, but how does it live on.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG TODAY'S YOUTH

Scholars differentiate between civic engagement as volunteerism and civic participation, and as electoral engagement and political voice. Each mode of participation carries different presumptions of what it means to be a good citizen; moreover, research suggests that most people engage in civic life in just one of these ways. One study, for example, found that only 16 percent of Americans (and only 11 percent of youth) were “dual activists” involved in both spheres.

Volunteerism and civic participation includes activities such as community service in helping the elderly or the homeless; involvement in a fundraising drive (e.g., direct giving of money, participating in a walk or run); or membership in a local or national group or organization. Youth are usually just as active in this sphere of civic life as older generations. For example, close to half of all youth have participated in a charity event or other fundraising drive in the last year and almost one-quarter are active members of a local group or organization; these percentages are comparable to today's “Generation X” (born between 1964 and 1976) and “Baby Boomer” (born between 1946 and 1964) generations.

An important distinction is between infrequent volunteering and more committed service in a community. Scholars suggest that today's youth are much more likely to engage in infrequent and episodic engagement that is focused on intrinsic gains and through informal project-based initiatives. One-time involvement in a Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless, for example, is preferred to working consistently for a food drive or at a soup kitchen. Young people may thus volunteer at higher rates than previous generations of youth, but they do so on a much less regular basis. Moreover, recent research finds a growing trend of “consumer activism”

whereby individuals make retail decisions to buy or not buy certain company's products based on social and political concerns and beliefs. Individualism and choice appear to be key for today's youth in regards to volunteerism and civic engagement.

Electoral engagement and political voice includes activities such as regular voting, displaying political signage (e.g., buttons, bumper stickers), contacting public officials or the media, and participating in a protest or demonstration. In this aspect of civic life, today's youth are much less engaged when compared to both today's older generations and past generations of youth. Almost 75 percent of youth are completely disengaged from political engagement, having never or only once done a political activity in the last twelve months. Youth's trust in government has fallen precariously in the last half-century; in 1960 over 80 percent of youth trusted the government while today it is below forty percent and dropping. This distrust and apathy is manifest in numerous ways. Incoming college freshmen, for example, are just half as likely to say that they discuss politics with friends or family than was true just thirty years ago (16 versus 30 percent, respectively).

A distinctive portrait of today's youth therefore emerges. While youth may be preoccupied with similar civic issues as their elders, they engage with such issues in fundamentally different ways. Civic engagement appears to be a zero-sum investment for most youth: either they engage in volunteerism or in political activity. Moreover, the ubiquity of what critics describe as a media-driven consumerist "me culture" translates into a seemingly self-interested and politically disengaged form of civic life. Even the apparent significance of the recent 2004 presidential elections could not bring more than 40 percent of eligible youth to the polls. When youth become civically involved, they apparently do so in their own ways and on their own terms.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The vast demographic shifts in American society have important ramifications on patterns of civic engagement. Groups that differ by class, race, ethnicity, and education have very different levels of engagement with and perceptions of civic and political institutions. These issues are not about to disappear; the US Census forecasts that whites will constitute a numeric minority by 2050 and such is already the case or soon to be in California, Texas, Arizona, and Florida.

Individuals in the highest economic quartile volunteer at more than twice the rate of individuals from the lowest economic quartile (53 versus 26 percent, respectively). African-American and Hispanic populations are much less likely to trust the government than non-Hispanic whites. Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely (even when taking into account earnings) to engage in political discussions with friends, to volunteer in civic organizations, and to donate funds to political organizations.

These patterns are especially pronounced in today's youth. For example, research has shown that youth from households that volunteer or that engage in political discussions are themselves much more likely to become civically and politically engaged; yet Hispanic and African-American households are less likely than white households to engage in such discussions or to volunteer. Likewise, young African-American and Hispanic males are much more likely than their white counterparts to feel that they cannot make a difference in solving problems in their communities and much less likely to trust the government.

Hispanic and African-American dropout rates are almost twice as high as those of white youth, and in many urban high schools dropout rates can be as high as 40 to 50 percent. Linking this information to the above-noted research about the benefits of educational levels upon later civic and political engagement suggests a disturbing trend: the intertwining of race, ethnicity, class, and educational level produces an alarming "civic gap" between poor and non-white youth and their more privileged and whiter peers.

There are of course some positive countertrends: African-Americans are just as likely to be registered to vote and actually have higher voter turnout percentages than whites. Women

are slightly more active than men across all categories of civic and political involvement. African-American and white women aged 18-24, in fact, have the highest turnout among young voters and African-American women's overall voter turnout has increased steadily since 1972. Finally, there is a consistently growing acceptance of diversity among youth. Today's youth are more tolerant of others, more open to gay and lesbian couples, have more positive attitudes about immigrants, and are more committed to free speech than either today's older generations or youth in previous generations.

HIGH SCHOOLS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Given the disengagement of many youth from all facets of public life, many scholars argue that schools, and high schools in particular, offer the best opportunity to rekindle and reinforce civic engagement. Specifically, scholars argue that high schools can promote civic engagement through civics education, community service, and service-learning.

Civics education used to be a mainstay of the high school curriculum. Three distinct courses (civics, democracy, and government) used to be required until the 1960s. Yet today less than 40 percent of all elementary school children have a daily social studies class and almost one-third of all high school seniors do not even have a basic understanding of how American government works. Many teachers shy away from civics and social studies issues due to the potentially contentious content matter; moreover, these courses are no longer considered part of the "core academic subjects" and as such are not part of the battery of current standardized tests required under the No Child Left Behind federal legislation. Civics and social studies are therefore often below the radar for funding priorities, resource distribution, and teachers' and administrators' time allocation.

Yet a growing number of educators, policymakers, and scholars argue that civic education is key for preparing youth for the real world. High school is viewed as the only place where youth have the opportunity to learn about and interact with other types of peoples and

cultures, and the only safe space where youth learn to engage in critical thinking in order to thoughtfully and deliberately express their voice. Deborah Meier, for example, has forcefully argued that schools should be judged as much by their high school graduates' civic engagement – such as whether they vote or give blood – rather than simply focusing on their test scores. And civic education and social studies appear to make a distinct difference. Students who took such courses were much more likely to volunteer, vote, and engage in political discussions with friends and family than students who had not taken such classes. Moreover, students who are given the opportunity for engaged learning – through simulations, debates, and role plays – are much more likely to believe that their voices matter and that they can make a difference in their communities.

One obvious extension of the potential of civics education is community service. Community service is traditionally defined as a non-curricular based activity (e.g. working in a soup kitchen, visiting the elderly) that is either required or offered by the school. Two-thirds of all schools provide community service opportunities for students, with high schools having the highest percentage of use (83%). This may be attributable to many state and district requirements of community service for high school graduation. Interestingly, more than half of all youth are not supportive of such requirements, though support is higher amongst females and students who are academically successful or already have some political knowledge.

Another extension of civic education is service-learning. Service-learning is traditionally defined as a curriculum-based activity that integrates community service into classroom instruction. Such active learning is becoming more popular in K-12 and higher education as teachers link their teaching to real-world issues. Almost 30 percent of all schools offer service-learning, with high schools again having the highest percentage of use (44%).

Both community service and service-learning provide important opportunities for enhancing civic engagement among today's youth. They provide real-world and real-time applications and contexts for academic learning. Such experiential learning, advocates argue,

has both a solid history in the work of John Dewey and a promising future for overcoming the apathy prevalent in “chalk and talk” classrooms. Service-learning, for example, has been shown to positively impact students’ cognitive, affective, and civic outcomes.

Some troubling issues remain, though. NCES (2003) data suggests that students who were required to perform community service in high school were much less likely to volunteer eight years after graduation (only 28 percent did so) than those who had done community service voluntarily (43 percent) and were actually comparable to students who did not volunteer at all in high school (26 percent). A similar concern is voiced about service-learning. Namely, there is wide variance in who teaches such courses, how they are taught, and their specific designs (e.g., duration, preparation, depth of engagement), all of which confounds simple answers to its relevance and impact on civic and academic outcomes.

Finally, it should be noted that some scholars suggest that schools must look beyond academic coursework or community service in order to provide youth with opportunities for legitimate political engagement. Being a participatory citizen is not enough, such scholars argue. Volunteering and service are ultimately individual acts that do not require comprehension of larger social, economic or political policies and structures. Individual actions may require compassion based on visible and seemingly changeable issues (e.g., a person is hungry, thus give them food in a homeless shelter), but there is a need to help youth engage in collective actions that require the development and enactment of a vision of what could and should be different about issues often abstract, complex, and not easily changeable (e.g., the federal funding levels of WIC [the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children] to support the nutritional health of low-income women, infants, and children). Put otherwise, some scholars suggest that questioning unjust and inequitable practices and policies is key to a strong democracy; community service and civic engagement, they note, were strongly supported by the regimes of Weimer Germany and Communist China.

From this perspective, youth's civic and political disengagement has nothing to do with apathy or a consumerist mindset; youth are disengaged exactly because they do not see viable means of making their voices heard. By creating opportunities for true social change and community activism, a politically activist perspective suggests that youth can channel their creativity and questioning into productive directions for change and civic engagement.

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