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Rethinking Civic Engagement

How Young Adults Participate in Politics and the Community

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Introduction

Civic engagement is a key indicator of adulthood. Young adults respond to the social and political issues of the day in a variety of ways. After the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, young people demonstrated against racial injustice in more than 10,000 peaceful protests around the country.[1] That fall saw record numbers of youth turn out for the presidential election; half of eligible voters ages 18–29 participated, compared with 39 percent in 2016.[2] Climate change likewise catalyzed young people, as nearly 30 percent of Generation Z and Millennials made donations, contacted public officials, volunteered, or protested, surpassing Generation X and Baby Boomers.[3] Young people are commonly assumed to be disengaged, disillusioned, and uninterested in civic life. These trends challenge that proposition.

Researchers have consistently found that early civic engagement is mutually beneficial to young people and to the communities in which they participate. For example, developmental psychologist Parissa Ballard and colleagues found that early civic engagement is associated with positive health outcomes later in life. Voting, volunteering, and activism in young adulthood were related to improved mental health, greater educational attainment, and higher personal and household incomes.[4] Beyond these individual benefits, young adults are important contributors to their local communities. Tufts University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) projected that in the 2020 election cycle, young adults would play a particularly important role in the presidential battleground states Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Florida, as well as in Senate races in Colorado, Maine, and Montana and congressional races in Iowa's 1st District, Maine's 2nd, and Georgia's 7th.[5] The youth vote proved decisive in several states where the margin of victory was less than 50,000 votes, including Arizona, Georgia, and Pennsylvania.[6]

National legislation and educational policy reflect the importance of preparing young people to become engaged and participatory members of society. Recognizing the mutual benefits of community service for the advancement of communities and the well-being of young people, Congress passed the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. The first law created the Commission on National and Community Service to support school-based service-learning programs, volunteer and service programs in higher education, youth corps, and national service models; the second merged the commission with the National Civilian Community Corps to establish the Corporation for National and Community Service, to support volunteer and service opportunities for all Americans. In 2009 Congress passed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, reauthorizing and expanding national and community service legislation to support lifelong volunteerism and community service. Through these acts, Congress has emphasized the need for civic engagement, which helps youth become informed citizens as well as active members of their communities throughout their lifetime.

School curricula reinforce the expectation that young people will become engaged citizens. According to the Center for American Progress, 40 states and the District of Columbia require a civics course for high school graduation, and 16 states require a civics exam to graduate. However, only Maryland and the District of Columbia require community service for all high school graduates.[7]

Recent youth activism and voting have garnered significant attention, but how else are young people contributing to the civic and political life of their communities? And why is civic engagement so important to their development?

Civic engagement is critical to a well-functioning liberal democracy, where citizens elect public officials and those officials are responsive to the views and needs of the people. And yet, democracy in the United States has not been realized equally for all people. The voices and political power of some have been silenced through gerrymandering, voter suppression, and other forms of institutional oppression. Constitutional amendments and transformational legislation, from the 15th and 19th Amendments to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, have provided the legal basis to demand equal political access and opportunity for all. More recently, activists have sought to secure those protections, expand on them, and reform government to work for all people, regardless of race, class, or gender.

Even still, young people often seek means of engagement that extend beyond the traditional bounds of organized politics and community service. Civic engagement is an important part of our democratic society, and it is a meaningful part of young people's healthy development and transition into adulthood. This report explores the concept of civic engagement and the distinctive, and sometimes unaccounted for, ways that young people participate in their communities to improve social conditions, voice their needs and concerns, and uphold democracy.

What Is Civic Engagement?

Civic engagement is a widely used term that can encompass a broad range of individual and collective civil and political participation. The phrase typically brings to mind things like community service, volunteering, political participation, or even activism. According to researchers Richard Adler and Judy Goggin, "Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future."[8] The definition is debated, however, and there is no consensus among scholars and practitioners on what civic engagement is or even should be.

Some scholars contend that the concept of civic engagement should be broad in scope and flexible enough to encompass a spectrum of activities that reflects the many ways people seek to participate in and improve community life.[9] On the other hand, considering it as an extensive range of activities can be a source of confusion when one is tracking and comparing types or rates of civic activity. For instance, if one organization understands civic engagement as volunteering and another as civil disobedience, how can we understand the civic dispositions of different communities?

This report takes a comprehensive approach to civic engagement. Even more than a particular set of actions, civic engagement is how we interact with our communities and society at large to address or prevent a public problem or concern. Psychologist James Youniss and colleagues, in a paper titled "Youth Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century," put it this way:

> Perhaps the fairest conclusion is that there is not a definite demarcation between political and civil realms. Rather there is a continuum between formal political acts such as voting, political actions such as protesting for a moral cause, and performing a service such as working in a rural literacy campaign. Scholarship concerned with young people's preparation for civic participation as adults would be wise to take into account the whole range.[10]

A Broad Approach to Civic Engagement

There are several ways to categorize and describe civic engagement, particularly in relation to youth involvement and upholding the principles of democracy. In line with the broad-spectrum approach, political scientists Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, in "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology," outline a framework for categorizing civic engagement and political participation. In this typology, engagement is divided into three major categories: *civil participation*, *political participation*, and *nonparticipation*. Across each of these domains, civic engagement can be either individual or collective.[11]

Within the *civil participation* category there is social involvement and civic engagement. Social involvement is interest in and attention to social and political issues; it includes learning about political issues, affiliation with a particular social or political group, and lifestyle choices that reflect that affiliation. Civic engagement comprises actions supporting social and political causes, typically done outside the formal political sphere; it includes activities like making charitable donations, composting, and volunteering.

Ekman and Amnå's next category, *political participation*, includes formal political participation and activism or extraparliamentary political participation. Formal political participation is engagement in the traditional political sphere, including voting, contacting political representatives, and running for public office. Activism or extraparliamentary political participation encompasses behavior beyond the confines of established political structures. It includes lawful activism, such as boycotts and involvement in social movements, and unlawful activism in the form of civil disobedience or politically motivated violence.

The final category is *nonparticipation*, which can be active or passive. Active nonparticipation is anti-political and motivated by dissatisfaction or disgust. Passive nonparticipation, on the other hand, is apolitical and stems from lack of interest and a perception that politics is not important. Nonparticipation can include nonvoting, avoiding social and political conversations, and avoidance of political news media.

Civic Engagement for a Diverse Democracy

Scholars Barry Checkoway and Adriana Aldana at the University of Michigan School of Social Work go a step further. They argue that as democratic societies like the United States grow increasingly diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other social identities, young people support this increasing diversity and uphold democracy in four ways: through *grassroots organizing*,

citizen participation, *intergroup dialogue*, and *sociopolitical development*.[12]

These types are theoretical exemplars and in practice often occur simultaneously or in stages. *Grassroots organizing* involves groups of people working together to influence and change established institutions or policies. Through grassroots organizing, youth seek to uphold democracy by mobilizing everyday people to influence public decision-making through collective action. This includes extraparliamentary forms of civic engagement like protesting, demonstrations, and civil disobedience. *Citizen participation* aligns with Amnå and Ekman's formal political participation and includes actions within the established political domain like voting, speaking at public hearings, and serving in public office. Through citizen participation, youth uphold the belief that ordinary people should take interest in government and politics and participate in local and national political institutions. *Intergroup dialogue* involves structured conversations between groups of people from different backgrounds to promote understanding of social identity (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) and related social oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism).[13] The goal of those participating in intergroup dialogue is to learn about and collaborate across differences to improve and maintain a diverse democratic society. Finally, youth uphold a diverse democracy through *sociopolitical development*, a process whereby young people learn about how their society works, critique how institutions may systematically advantage or disadvantage some groups of people, and work individually or in community to improve society through action.[14]

In Checkoway and Aldana's framework, civic engagement that supports a diverse democracy is as much about action as it is about engaged discussion and thoughtful critique of our current sociopolitical structures. This is especially relevant during young adulthood, a developmental period that is key to determining one's identity, social and political beliefs, and ways of engaging with community.

One of the biggest critiques of a broad approach to civic engagement is that it may be difficult to pinpoint what types of actions and behaviors any given group is referring to. One group could use "civic engagement" to mean community service and volunteerism, while another could mean community organizing and boycotts. (From this perspective, each type of civic engagement should be referred to by its specific name or type to provide clarity and avoid confusion.) However, by considering distinct types of civic engagement under one umbrella, we can acknowledge that civic engagement is multifaceted and that different communities and individuals use varying (and often multiple) methods to take part in civic life. A broad perspective of civic engagement allows scholars to have a common starting place in understanding civic engagement. It also helps us disentangle these varying ways of engaging, understand how young adults might change their engagement as they get older, learn how engagement differs for young adults from diverse backgrounds, and see how engagement changes from one era to the next. We can, for instance, learn about how voting and volunteering are different while recognizing both as equally important components of civic engagement.

Three Types of Engaged Citizens

Along with different categories of civic engagement, scholars have proposed three types of engaged citizens. In this context, *citizen* does not denote legally sanctioned status in a geopolitical entity but rather participation in a community or polity. Education scholars Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne suggest that there are three types of citizens that help to uphold democracy and maintain a democratic society: the *personally responsible citizen*, the *participatory citizen*, and the *justice-oriented citizen*.[15]

Personally responsible citizens value individual contributions to the overall good of their community and demonstrate these values through socially responsible civic engagement, like following the law, recycling, and volunteering. They value character — being honest, working hard, and having respect for oneself and others. *Participatory citizens* value contributions to the social and political life of their local, state, and national communities. They are interested not only in the character and moral value of the community but in the collective governmental and organizing work that supports it. Participatory citizens focus on forms of civic engagement that help them understand and shape the policies and procedures of the community. *Justice-oriented citizens* are also interested in collective civic engagement to support and improve the community but are not interested merely in upholding the status quo. They are instead dedicated to understanding and dismantling systems of oppression to improve social conditions.

As a comparative example, take the social and political issue of housing insecurity. A personally responsible citizen, who is socially aware and values character, might volunteer at a local homeless shelter or donate money to local nonprofits that build affordable housing. A participatory citizen values leadership and collective responsibility and might serve on the board of directors of the local nonprofit or campaign for a political candidate who wants to address housing insecurity. A justice-oriented citizen, who values social change and justice, might lobby local political officials to consider living wage legislation or zoning rules that prioritize affordable housing in desirable neighborhoods. This citizen might also organize or participate in a protest or demonstration to bring awareness to the issue and make calls to action for community members and leaders.

Taken as a whole, civic engagement comprises a variety of actions or activities and can be motivated by different values and goals for society. Some actions may be more altruistic and rooted in a strong sense of social responsibility. Other actions may be more justice oriented and geared toward transforming and improving society through structural change.

Civic engagement is online, offline, and integrated between the two spaces. It is grounded in the community and extends to and beyond our traditional political structures. Now that we understand more clearly what civic engagement is, we can look to see what young people are doing to be civically engaged and how civic engagement evolves throughout young adulthood.

How Are Young People Civically Engaged?

From voting and protesting to volunteering and organizing, the youngest adults in our society are committed to bettering their local and national communities through a variety of community-based, formal political, and social justice–centered means.

Conversations, Charity, and Neighborly Engagement

Young people are highly involved in what Amnå and Ekman describe as civil participation. This type of civic engagement aligns with Westheimer and Kahne's personally responsible citizen, who is concerned with personal social responsibility and the general well-being of the local community. One of the most popular types of civic engagement, according to CIRCLE's 2018 national data on a broad range of youth civic engagement activities, was discussing political, societal, or local issues with family or friends. Nationwide, 61.2 percent of young people (ages 16–29) reported participating in that type of civic engagement. Rates of participation were highest in Montana (71.1 percent) and lowest in Florida (44.6 percent). Young people also discussed political, societal, or local issues with their neighbors (22.1 percent nationwide) and through the internet or social media (14.6 percent nationwide).[16]

Young adults are also involved in volunteering and charity as a part of their civic engagement. In 2018, 30.3 percent of young people (ages 16–29) reported having volunteered on their own, at school, or with an organization in the past 12 months; 20.6 percent said they had done something positive for their neighborhood or community.[17] According to the Do Good Institute at the University of Maryland, volunteering among young people (ages 22–35 in its study) peaked in 2003 at nearly 29 percent and declined to a low in 2015 of 24.9 percent.[18] According to the institute, this decline represents roughly 5 million people. Charitable giving was more stable nationwide, hovering near 50 percent.[19]

Civic Engagement in the Political Sphere

Along with the civic engagement characteristic of a personally responsible citizen, young people are deeply involved within the scope of formal politics or participatory citizenship. CIRCLE has been collecting data on youth political involvement for the past several election cycles. According to the 2020 CIRCLE Election Center, 50 percent of young people ages 18–29 voted in the 2020 presidential election, up from 39 percent in 2016. This is in part due to first-time voters; approximately 20 percent of youth voters in 2020 were turning out for the first time. Forty percent of youth voters in 2020 had voted in both 2016 and 2018, and 40 percent had voted in both 2012 and 2016.[20]

In 2020 white youth had the highest voter turnout among young people at 61 percent. Not far behind were Latino young adults (48 percent), Asian young adults (47 percent) and Black young adults (43 percent). Young women had a higher voter turnout (55 percent) than young men (44 percent). When one considers both race and gender, white women (60 percent) and Latina women (56 percent) had the highest voter turnout in 2020, while Latino men (39 percent) and Black men (31 percent) had the lowest.[21] In the presidential contest, the youth vote was split, with 61 percent of youth voting for Democratic nominee Joe Biden and 37 percent voting for Republican incumbent Donald Trump. Youth voting choice was also differentiated by race/ethnicity. An overwhelming majority (87 percent) of Black youth voted for Joe Biden, while just half (51 percent) of white youth did so.

Another way in which young people are involved in electoral politics is through political donations. While young people donate less than their older counterparts, this is still an important mode of civic engagement for some. For the 2018 midterm election cycle, roughly 8 percent of young people ages 18–24 reported donating to a midterm election campaign. This matched the donation rate during the 2016 presidential election cycle, which was also about 8 percent according to CIRCLE.[22] While young adults are unlikely to spend large amounts of money on political campaigns, smaller donations are especially important for women and people of color who are running for office.[23]

Beyond voting and political donations, young people continue to make their voices heard within the formal political domain. According to CIRCLE, 11.2 percent of young people reported having expressed an opinion to a public official in 2018.[24] Young people are also involved in traditional political campaigns. For the 2018 midterm election, 7 percent of young people (ages 18–24) volunteered for a political campaign.[25] Perhaps more telling, in that same poll, another one-fourth of young adults reported that they *would* volunteer for a political campaign if there were an opportunity to do so. This suggests that young adults are an untapped or underutilized resource for political campaigns. They want to volunteer but may feel there are barriers to entry or participation.

Extraparliamentary Civic Engagement

Young adults are also justice-oriented citizens who participate in civic and political life with the goal of

upholding democratic principles of equality. They are involved in a variety of activities that push our society to address the growing and diverse needs of members of our communities who are otherwise overlooked. This type of civic engagement includes protesting, demonstrating, and boycotting, among other actions.

Protests and demonstrations are a notable form of civic engagement for young people. Globally, young adults are more likely than in the past to protest and demonstrate, while older adults are less likely to participate in protests than in previous decades.[26] This is also true in the United States. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, between May 24 and August 22, 2020, there were approximately 10,600 protests and demonstrations in the United States.[27] The vast majority of these protests (95 percent) were peaceful. Many were associated with racial justice movements, with peaceful protests occurring in more than 2,400 cities and towns across the country. With this increase in demonstrations came a civic engagement opportunity for young adults. In June 2020, the Pew Research Center reported that 6 percent of adults in the United States had recently attended a racial justice–related protest. It also found that these protesters were more likely to be young and less likely to be white than Americans overall.[28] Similarly, in an October 2020 Mott Poll, roughly 8 percent of parents reported that their adolescent child had attended a racial justice or police reform protest or demonstration.[29]

In addition to protests and demonstrations, young people exercise their political voice in non-electoral ways. For instance, 13.6 percent of young adults ages 16–29 report making consumer choices for political reasons.[30] Consumer choices can be in the form of boycotts, where customers withhold their money from a particular company, and "buycotts," where they purposefully purchase a company's products or services to show support for its social and political decisions. This type of consumer activism may be especially attractive to young people who are uninterested in or disenfranchised from formal political participation.[31]

Young adults are also engaged in social change to uplift their communities through grassroots mutual aid projects. These are initiatives in which people work together to provide coordinated material and social support to others in their community, particularly when typical governmental structures fall short of meeting their needs. As legal scholar Dean Spade argues, "Mutual aid is an often devalued iteration of radical collective care that provides a transformative alternative to the demobilizing frameworks."[32] Mutual aid is distinguished from charity in that it is organized within a community rather than by an outside entity. Mutual aid is also distinct in that its participants center an egalitarian worldview that prioritizes community care and reciprocity. According to the Mutual Aid Hub, there are more than 900 mutual aid networks across the United States.[33] The importance of these networks has increased alongside the economic fallout of and wanting government response to the Covid-19 pandemic. While it is difficult to pinpoint how many young people are involved in mutual aid projects, youth organizers and youth-led community-based social justice organizations across the country are leading the growth in grassroots community-based mutual aid.[34]

Social media is an important vehicle used by young adults to learn about, promote, and participate in civic action as justice-oriented citizens. In fact, more than half of young people ages 18–29 report using social media sites to find information about local rallies and protests. Younger adults are also more likely than older adults to use social media hashtags related to social and political issues and post pictures to support a social or political cause on their social media accounts. Further, compared with 47 percent in 2018, 59 percent of young people in 2020 felt it was important to use social media to find others who share similar views on social and political issues. Fifty-eight percent of young adults thought social media was an important way to engage with social and political issues, compared with 43 percent of adults ages 30–49 and 36 percent of adults over 50.[35]

Altogether, the data shows that young adults are involved in a variety of civic engagement activities across multiple dimensions and typologies. The next question, then, is how does civic engagement change over the course of young adulthood?

Civic Engagement Throughout Young Adulthood

Civic engagement shifts over the course of young adulthood, and these shifts vary by race and gender. Using data from the Monitoring the Future study, psychologists Laura Wray-Lake, Erin Arruda, and John Schulenberg found that electoral participation and political voice tend to increase from age 18 to 30. Similarly, political interest increases from age 18 to 24 but then remains constant through late young adulthood. Political interest increases faster among Black and Latino young adults than among their white counterparts. Black young adults also experience the fastest growth in electoral participation during early young adulthood, compared with Latino, Asian, and white young adults. By age 25, electoral participation among all young adults continues to increase at similar rates.[36]

Community service follows a different trend, decreasing from age 18 to 24 and then increasing slightly in late young adulthood (age 25 to 30) for white and Asian young adults and remaining steady for Black and Latino young adults. Women see faster declines than men from age 18 to 24.[37]

These trends suggest that civic engagement largely continues to grow during the transition to adulthood and throughout the young adult years, especially in the formal political domain. This presents an important opportunity for organizations that want to invigorate political interest and participation. It seems that between the ages of 18 and 30, increasing numbers of young people engage with politics, are interested in politics, and share their political voice. This is especially true for Black and Latino young adults, who show the most growth in political participation and interest throughout young adulthood.

Psychologists Andrea Finlay, Constance Flanagan, and Laura Wray-Lake found that young adults tend to fall into three categories of civic engagement that encompass multiple types of activities: *inactive*, *voting-involved*, and *highly committed*. At the beginning of young adulthood (age 19, as defined by Finlay and colleagues), people were more likely to be *inactive* (39 percent), engaging in little or no voting, volunteering, or other civic activity. However, by the end of young adulthood (age 29), only 11 percent of young adults were considered inactive. *Voting-involved* people often or always vote in local and national elections, in addition to volunteering and other civic engagement. At the beginning of young adulthood, 29 percent of people were voters; this rose to 70 percent by the end of young adulthood. The final group, the *highly committed*, participate in many types of civic engagement and do so often, with an emphasis on attending community events and meetings. Roughly 32 percent of young adults began as highly committed, decreasing to 19 percent by the end of young adulthood.[38] These statistics show a shift toward political engagement, where both the inactive and the highly committed move to consistent participation in electoral politics. For the previously inactive, voting increases, and for the previously highly committed, voting remains steady or increases even as they engage less in other ways.

Conclusion

Civic engagement is a broad term that spans volunteering, voting, activism, campaigning, mutual aid projects, boycotts, and a variety of other socially and politically motivated actions. This wide spectrum of activities are part of civic development, wherein young adults can begin and sustain participation in our local and national social and political discourse and decision-making.

For many young adults, the nature of their civic engagement shifts over time as they determine who they want to be in relation to the rest of the world and how they want to engage with society. Early civic involvement is often predictive of future and sustained engagement, but even young adults who were disengaged early in their adult lives can find ways to contribute to their community that are meaningful to them. Some young adults participate as personally responsible citizens, focused on good character and civic activity that is altruistic and supports individuals. Other young adults engage as participatory citizens, ready to take on leadership roles and consistent involvement with government and politics. Yet others pursue civic engagement with a social justice orientation. For those young adults, civic participation is a means to improve the lives and well-being of people from marginalized communities. Regardless of their type of engagement, young adults are the key to our future democracy, and they are making their voices heard through community, through formal politics, and beyond the political realm.

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