

# Civic Engagement and the Transition to Adulthood

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*Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine*

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## Summary

Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine survey research on civic engagement among U.S. adolescents and young adults. Civic engagement, they say, is important both for the functioning of democracies and for the growth and maturation it encourages in young adults, but opportunities for civic engagement are not evenly distributed by social class or race and ethnicity.

Today's young adults, note the authors, are less likely than those in earlier generations to exhibit many important characteristics of citizenship, raising the question of whether these differences represent a decline or simply a delay in traditional adult patterns of civic engagement. Flanagan and Levine also briefly discuss the civic and political lives of immigrant youth in the United States, noting that because these youth make up a significant share of the current generation of young adults, their civic engagement is an important barometer of the future of democracy.

The authors next survey differences in civic participation for youth from different social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. They explore two sets of factors that contribute to a lower rate of civic engagement among low-income and minority young adults. The first is cumulative disadvantage—unequal opportunities and influences before adulthood, especially parental education. The second is different institutional opportunities for civic engagement among college and non-college youth during the young-adult years. Flanagan and Levine survey various settings where young adults spend time—schools and colleges, community organizations, faith-based institutions, community organizing and activism projects, and military and other voluntary service programs—and examine the opportunities for civic engagement that each affords.

As the transition to adulthood has lengthened, say the authors, colleges have become perhaps the central institution for civic incorporation of younger generations. But no comparable institution exists for young adults who do not attend college. Opportunities for sustained civic engagement by year-long programs such as City Year could provide an alternative opportunity for civic engagement for young adults from disadvantaged families, allowing them to stay connected to mainstream opportunities and to adults who could mentor and guide their way.

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**T**he civic engagement of young adults—whether in the form of joining community groups, volunteering to help neighbors, or leading grassroots efforts to gain civil rights—is important to the health and performance of democracy. It is also important for personal growth and identity formation during the transition to adulthood.

When younger Americans have a voice in community affairs, they can contribute their insights to public debates and their energies to addressing public problems. Issues that centrally involve adolescents and young adults—such as the high-school dropout crisis, the costs of higher education, or youth violence—especially benefit from youth input. Young adults who identify with, have a stake in, and want to contribute to their communities can help to stabilize democratic societies by directing their discontent into constructive channels. They can also be a force for political change, by bringing new perspectives on political issues and offering fresh solutions.

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The personal and psychological benefits of civic engagement for young adults include fulfillment of the human need to belong and to feel that life has a purpose beyond the

pursuit of individual gain. Whether through voting, working in community-based organizations to address local problems, or volunteering time or money to a social cause, civic activities raise issues involving connection to others, public goods and values, and the collective nature of solving problems. Engaging with fellow members of a community-based group also helps youth form social networks, build social capital, and connect to educational and occupational opportunities.

### **Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood**

Like other markers of adulthood such as finishing school and starting a family, civic engagement is a key part of the transition between adolescence and mature adulthood. During childhood and adolescence people become aware of political institutions, social issues, and larger communities; learn facts and concepts related to politics; and begin to practice active citizenship by volunteering, belonging to groups, consuming news media, and discussing issues. The opportunities and choices of these years shape interests and pathways.<sup>1</sup> During late adolescence and young adulthood, people chart a course for their future and “take stock” of the values they live by and the kind of world they want to be part of. Moral and political issues become salient concerns. Exploring alternative political perspectives, working with people from different social backgrounds, and wrestling with a range of perspectives on social issues provide opportunities to reflect on one’s own views and decide where one stands.

According to life-cycle theories, stable patterns of civic engagement take hold once individuals have settled into adult roles, such as steady jobs, marriage, and parenting, that build up their stake in community affairs. These adult roles give a predictable structure

to life that makes regular engagement in community affairs more likely and increases the probability of being recruited into civic affairs.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the lives of young adults are unsettled and in flux as they move into and out of institutional settings such as school or work. Although they are more likely to take part in civic life when they are in such settings, their involvement tends to be episodic. Nonetheless, opportunities to explore civic issues and to wrangle with others who have different perspectives help young adults to crystallize their values and political stands. Political identities formed in the early-adult years are highly predictive of the positions individuals will hold in middle and even late adulthood. Political views as well as levels and forms of engagement will vary within every generation, but the politics of a generation takes shape in the context of the political climate, issues, and range of tenable solutions circulating when a cohort comes of age.

In this article, we summarize research findings on civic engagement in late adolescence and early adulthood and on how patterns of engagement today may differ from those in earlier generations. As the transition to adulthood lengthens, is it taking longer for persistent patterns of civic engagement to take hold? We discuss how civic participation varies for youth from different social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and for new immigrants. In particular, we assess two sets of factors that may contribute to a civic divide. The first is cumulative disadvantage (unequal opportunities and influences before adulthood); the second is differing institutional opportunities during the young-adult years themselves. Next we focus on a variety of institutional settings where young adults spend time—schools and colleges, community organizations, faith-based groups, community activist groups, the military, and year-long

programs such as AmeriCorps—and examine the opportunities for civic engagement that each affords. We conclude with a discussion of policy directions.

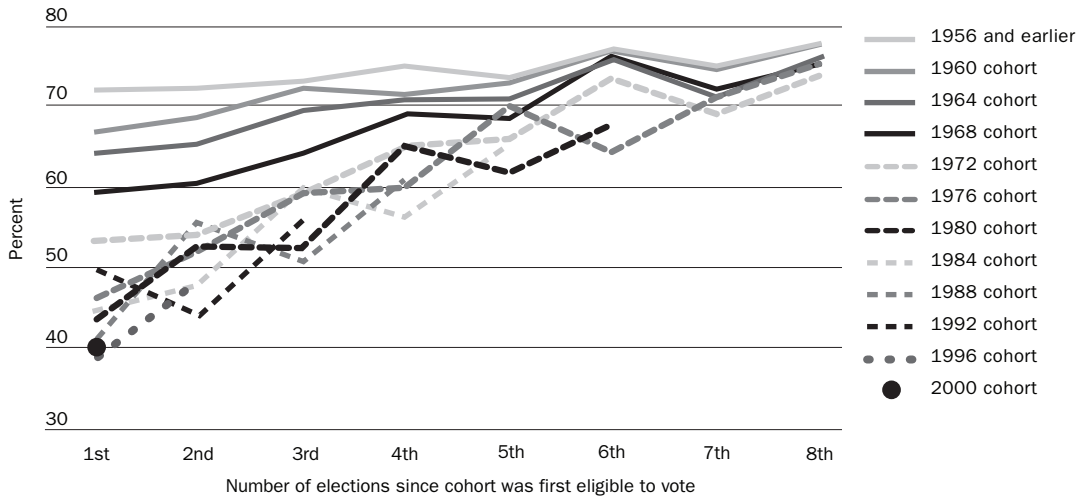
## **Decline or Delay? Trends in Young Adults' Civic Engagement**

Young adults today are less likely than their counterparts in the 1970s were to exhibit nine out of ten important characteristics of citizenship: belonging to at least one group, attending religious services at least monthly, belonging to a union, reading newspapers at least once a week, voting, being contacted by a political party, working on a community project, attending club meetings, and believing that people are trustworthy.<sup>3</sup> Only in a tenth form of citizenship—volunteering—are they more likely to participate, probably as a result of deliberate efforts over the past several decades by schools, colleges, and community groups to encourage volunteering. For several of these ten types of engagement—notably voting—rates have risen in the 2000s compared with the 1990s, but not enough to compensate for thirty years of decline.

These changes invite us to ask whether the nation's younger generations have permanently weaker connections to civic life than their predecessors or whether the lengthening transition to adulthood means that young people today take longer to begin to forge those connections (much as they take longer to get married or finish their education).

Trends in voting provide evidence that at least some of the change is a matter of delay, not a permanent generational decline. During any era, young adults are less likely than their elders to vote. Since 1972, when eighteen-year-old Americans were first eligible to vote, the voting gap between youth aged eighteen to twenty-five and their elders has fluctuated

Figure 1. Voting Turnout over the Life Course



Source: Census Current Population Supplement.

in presidential election years between 16 percent and 27 percent, with the smallest margin in 1972 and the largest in 2000.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1 shows voting rates over the life course for twelve different cohorts (each born within a different four-year period) that became eligible to vote in time for presidential elections from 1956 to 2000. The overall pattern is that each generation moves toward the same high level of turnout over the life course. For instance, the cohorts that are old enough to have voted in five elections are all voting at rates above 60 percent. But the earlier generations start at a higher rate and rise less to reach the 60 percent level or above. Every successive cohort has had a lower starting point, but has also become substantially more engaged during their twenties and into their thirties, narrowing the gap.

This interpretation is consistent with a political life-cycle model that holds that political engagement increases as one's life, roles, and institutional connections in the community

become more stable. Delays in role changes (stable jobs, marriage, and family formation) associated with the increasingly protracted transition to adulthood have been accompanied by delays in the voting patterns of successive cohorts of young adults. These trends in voting patterns tell a story of delay rather than one of decline.

But a protracted developmental period and delayed civic engagement cannot explain all the changes in forms of engagement. First, certain civic activities have become *more* common for young adults than they once were. As noted, the volunteering rate for young adults rose during the 1990s and is higher today than it was during the 1970s and 1980s. Today young adults are about as likely as their contemporary elders to volunteer, raise funds for causes, and say they have worked on local projects with other people in their communities. Youth today are more likely than their contemporary elders to engage in global activism, to use the Internet for political information and action (which

was impossible thirty years ago), and to engage in lifestyle and consumer politics.<sup>5</sup>

Second, in some forms of civic engagement that have declined substantially, younger generations do not catch up with their elders as they move through their twenties. Newspaper readership is one example: recent generations have not narrowed the gap with their parents as they have aged.<sup>6</sup> Social trust reflected generational declines through the 1990s but showed some recovery in the new millennium and, across cohorts, increased through the third decade of life.<sup>7</sup> For some other forms of engagement (such as meeting attendance and working on community projects), we lack sufficient long-term data to be able to tell whether downward trends represent declines or delays.

For several decades, both forms and patterns of young adult civic engagement have been changing. For example, panel studies indicate that patterns of civic engagement in young adulthood have become increasingly episodic over the past several generations. Even the civic engagement of the baby boom generation (1965 high school graduating cohort) was more episodic than that of their parents at similar ages. Consequently, it is more challenging to predict lifelong patterns of conventional engagement based on adolescent activity. For the baby boom generation, levels of civic engagement in high school were a poor predictor of engagement in their mid-twenties. As the boomers settled into adult roles in their thirties and forties, however, patterns of civic engagement became more predictable.<sup>8</sup> These trends across generations have led to speculation that the character of American civic life is changing toward more short-term and episodic engagement and away from enduring memberships in associations and community organizations.

Nonetheless, the young adult years are a formative period when civic values and political ideologies crystallize. Opportunities for engaging with others to address civic concerns make it more likely that in the long run people will identify with and contribute to the common good.

## **Immigrant Youth and Undocumented Youth**

The nature of the civic and political lives of immigrant youth in the United States is an important barometer for the future of democracy, if for no other reason than that these youth make up a significant share of the younger generation (see the article by Rubén Rumbaut in this volume for more detail on immigrant youth). Examining the ways in which society includes or excludes these groups, the forms their political engagement takes, and the opportunities they have to exercise their political voice and develop civic competencies begin to yield a picture of tomorrow's political landscape. Besides sheer numbers, immigrant youth provide unique insights into the social contract and the ties of rights and responsibilities that bind us as Americans. Only immigrants, after all, choose to become U.S. citizens. That decision may be instrumental—a path to other ends—or it may be motivated by more lofty (patriotic) goals. In either case, choosing to become a citizen and accepting the rights and responsibilities of that decision is a form of civic engagement unique to immigrants. Newcomers who lack legal permanent residency, of course, do not have that choice.

For many immigrants, especially the undocumented, citizenship itself is contested, and everyday life raises political issues. It is estimated that roughly half of immigrant children live in families where at least one adult is not an American citizen. In 2005, it

was estimated that 11 percent of children in immigrant families were unauthorized and 18 percent were born in the United States to an unauthorized parent.<sup>9</sup> Many of the mainstream institutions that engage most Americans are not open to the undocumented. One exception is the public school, from which undocumented children cannot legally be excluded. Passages into adulthood (jobs or postsecondary education) after school, however, are severely constrained, because the undocumented cannot legally work and are denied access to most publicly funded programs, including ones with explicit civic missions, such as Conservation Corps. Even applying for a library card or driver's license is off limits for those without the proper identity papers. Furthermore, because the undocumented are ineligible for most college financial aid programs, they face enormous barriers to higher education.

It is thus not surprising that working to change systemic barriers and legalizing access to higher education are meaningful forms of civic engagement that unite immigrant communities. In a national survey of youth conducted in the spring of 2006—a time when major protests were being organized in most large American cities against restrictions on immigration—23 percent of immigrant youth and 18 percent of children of immigrant parents reported that they had protested in the past twelve months.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, young people who were born in the United States to native-born parents reported a protest rate of just 10 percent. Student activist groups such as California's Orange County Immigrant Student Group (OCISG) have coalesced around the shared goal of educational access. Group members, who come from California's postsecondary public education system, include both documented and undocumented immigrants and current,

former, and aspiring students. Organizing is now focused on the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act, a bill under consideration in Washington to legalize qualified young immigrants who came to the United States as children. Past organizing targeted California's Assembly Bill 540, which was signed into law in 2001 and which now guarantees in-state tuition for undocumented residents. That achievement is marked by some student leaders who refer to themselves as "AB 540 students." But their civic engagement extends beyond campus as they reach out to explain issues of access to high school students and their parents.<sup>11</sup>

Immigrant youth engage in a wide array of civic activities, working in faith-based groups and using their bilingual skills to assist fellow immigrants as translators and tutors. Comparisons of nationally representative studies of foreign-born, second-generation, and native-born seventh through twelfth graders reveal that new immigrants are just as likely as any of their contemporaries to embrace core American political values and to engage in volunteerism. Further, once socioeconomic differences are taken into account, immigrant youth are as likely, or almost as likely, as their native-born peers to be engaged in most conventional forms of civic participation.<sup>12</sup>

### **Social Class and Civic Participation**

The long-recognized and stubborn relationship in the United States between social class and political participation has been referred to as the "best-documented finding in American political behavior research."<sup>13</sup> The class divide in political participation takes many forms. The self-reported volunteering rate is 25 percent for young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-nine) who have attended college even briefly, but only 11

percent for those who have never attended college—about half the youth population.<sup>14</sup> In 2008, the voter turnout rate for young people without college experience was 36 percent, compared with 62 percent for those with college experience.<sup>15</sup> These gaps tend to be larger in the United States than in many European nations, where labor unions play a major role in political recruitment. Trends over the past several decades suggest that the U.S. class divide in civic participation has widened (although the verdict is still out).

Young people are most likely to become civically engaged when they are in settings, such as faith-based institutions, workplaces, schools, and community organizations, where they become knowledgeable about issues and about how to take action on them, where they are asked by someone to join an organization or attend a meeting, or where normative pressures encourage them to participate in civic affairs.<sup>16</sup> Young adults from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, however, do not have equal access to such opportunities.

Inequalities in political participation among young Americans are rooted in the differing education and political involvement of their parents. Parents of high socioeconomic status pass on to their children such advantages as political awareness, access to community and educational resources, and, ultimately, the child's own educational attainment. Parental education is a more powerful predictor of a young adult child's voting than is parental profession or income, though, not surprisingly, its influence diminishes over time as a child's adult roles and the normative pressures associated with them begin to shape habits of civic participation. Voting in young adulthood entails certain "costs," such as learning about political parties and about the registration and voting process; in addition, peers of

young adults are more likely to be non-voters. Having better educated parents overcomes many of these costs and also increases normative pressures to be engaged.<sup>17</sup>

The class divide in civic participation is thus attributable, in part, to cumulative disadvantage over the course of childhood and adolescence. But it also results from a lack of institutional opportunities for civic activities for young adults who do not attend college. In years past, non-college-bound youth had alternative sites for civic learning and recruitment. During the 1970s, for example, almost 14 percent of young adults without college experience belonged to unions, which promoted voting, leadership skills, and issue discussion among their members. And about 40 percent of young adults who had not gone to college attended weekly religious services, where they could be recruited for civic and political activities and consequently develop civic and organizational skills. More than two-thirds of this group also read a newspaper at least a "few times" a week to keep up with social issues and civic affairs. Today, however, according to the self-reports of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds who have not attended college, union membership has dropped by more than half (to just 6 percent), newspaper readership is down by more than one-third (to 45 percent), and regular religious attendance is down 5 points to about 41 percent.<sup>18</sup> These forms of engagement have declined for college-educated young people as well, but their situation is less isolating. Not only do they have college itself as a civic opportunity, but the alternative institutions appear to serve them better. They are, for example, more likely to belong to unions than their non-college-educated contemporaries. Thus even institutions traditionally understood as resources for the working class are now more likely to serve young members of the middle class.

The importance of “being there” in institutional settings (such as school or work) where one can be recruited into civic activities is illustrated by estimates by the Independent Sector that 71 percent of volunteers and 61 percent of charitable contributors take part in these activities at someone’s request.<sup>19</sup> A disconcerting report by Child Trends reveals that many of the nation’s young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four have no access to such settings: about 14 percent are not in school or the military, have no degree beyond high school, and are not in the work force. And that share has been growing.<sup>20</sup> Community-based programs like City Year provide one alternative institutional setting for youth who are not going to college, but funding for these programs falls far short of their needs.

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*Students’ engagement in extracurricular activities in high school and their feelings of social connectedness to community institutions predict voting and other forms of civic engagement in young adulthood.*

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### **Inequalities before the Transition to Adulthood**

The civic skills, habits, and motivations of young adults result, in part, from the accumulation of engagement opportunities in the child and adolescent years. Long-term studies have shown that, controlling for background factors, both students’ engagement in extracurricular activities in high school

and their feelings of social connectedness to community institutions predict voting and other forms of civic engagement in young adulthood.<sup>21</sup> Social incorporation into the body politic begins in the formative years through the opportunities that children and teens have as members of local organizations, exercising the rights and assuming the responsibilities associated with membership. In short, becoming a stakeholder in one’s society develops through the accumulated opportunities to be involved in groups that build civic identities and skills.

Social class disparities in civic participation that begin in the pre-adult years are exacerbated by unequal opportunities for gaining civic practice. Schools with more privileged student bodies, for example, provide more and better opportunities. Civic opportunity disparities also exist within schools; a student’s race or family background makes it more or less likely that he will engage in civically relevant activities such as studying the Constitution and engaging in mock trials or in community voluntary service.<sup>22</sup> Besides disparities in opportunities between and within schools, providing civic practice for children growing up in disadvantaged communities offers numerous challenges. For example, many volunteering and civic engagement opportunities take place in the context of community-based youth organizations. Those groups rely on adult volunteers to carry out programming, making it difficult for some low-income communities with very high ratios of children to adults to muster enough adult volunteers.<sup>23</sup>

Two specific events during a young person’s life are associated with reduced rates of adult civic engagement: dropping out of high school and being arrested. Long-term studies following eighth graders into early adulthood



show that, controlling for the effects of growing up in disadvantaged families and neighborhoods, dropping out of high school decreases voting turnout by 19 percent for whites, 11 percent for blacks, and 10 percent for Hispanics. Youths' reports of being arrested in the tenth or twelfth grade reduced voter turnout by 7 percent for whites and 21 percent for blacks.<sup>24</sup>

A felony conviction is a profound barrier to civic engagement. Current prisoners or former felons (or both) are forbidden to vote in forty-eight states, to hold public office in forty states, and to serve on juries in forty-seven states. Some "five million citizens—mostly poor people and people of color—... are currently locked out of the democratic process."<sup>25</sup> Not all of the five million are young adults, but felons and former felons are predominantly young, male, poor, and unsuccessful in school. Although the argument for not allowing felons who are in prison to vote is clear, the rationale for continuing to disenfranchise former felons who have served their time and paid their debt to society and who are now attempting to reintegrate into community life raises more difficult questions for society. Christopher Uggen and Sara Wakefield found that former felons "viewed disenfranchisement as a clear indicator that they were unwanted or unaccepted as full citizens in their communities"—a message that "may inhibit the assumption of other adult roles and undermine the reintegrative goal of encouraging offenders to empathize with or identify with other citizens."<sup>26</sup>

### **Institutionalized Opportunities for Civic Engagement**

Several leading American institutions already engage substantial numbers of people under the age of thirty in civic activities. These settings, though, could provide more effective

and equitable civic opportunities. We explore the most common forms of institutionalized engagement in the following sections.

#### **Community Volunteer Work**

Organized volunteering activities—typically arranged by schools, colleges, religious congregations, or nonprofit organizations—represent common institutionally supported opportunities for civic engagement and learning. Today's young adults grew up during a period when community service was becoming almost a normal part of growing up. Since the early 1990s, a steadily increasing number of middle and, especially, high schools have been offering some type of community service or service-learning courses as an option or, in some cases, a mandate for high school graduation. Trends in the Monitoring the Future study of high school seniors show that volunteering in the community has become more common. Between 1976 and 1990, rates were fairly steady, with 22 percent of young people reporting that they had participated in community affairs or volunteer work at least once or twice a month or more. Between 1990 and 2000 there was a steady increase, with 35 percent in 2000 reporting such involvement, and the trend has held steady since that time.<sup>27</sup>

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service's national study of public school principals, between 1999 and 2008 the share of middle and high schools offering opportunities for students to serve rose from 64 to 68 percent, with the share of high schools growing from 83 to 86 percent. Schools in low-income areas, however, were 26 percent less likely to have opportunities for service learning.<sup>28</sup>

Adolescents also get engaged in community service through community-based youth

organizations and religious congregations. According to a national survey of youth aged twelve to eighteen, those who regularly attend religious services are nearly twice as likely to volunteer as are those who never attend services. Of the 49 percent who attend weekly services, 64 percent report that they regularly volunteer in their community, although not necessarily with their congregation. The religious congregation is the main avenue through which youth from disadvantaged backgrounds volunteer.<sup>29</sup>

Colleges and universities are also offering more opportunities for, and expecting more students to engage in, community volunteer work. A comparison of a large student cohort attending more than a hundred universities between 1985 and 1989 and another cohort attending those same universities between 1994 and 1998 showed substantial increases in community service across time.<sup>30</sup> Population-based studies of American adults also show that the share of college students who have done some kind of volunteer work rose from 27.1 percent in 2002 to 30.2 percent in 2005, surpassing the 28.8 percent rate for the general adult population.<sup>31</sup>

Although only 11 percent of non-college young adults reported volunteering in 2008, that figure nevertheless represents millions of volunteers, most of whom served through institutions. Thirty-seven percent of young-adult volunteers without college experience reported serving through churches or other religious congregations; 27 percent, through children's educational, sports, or recreational programs. In both cases, volunteers without college experience were more likely than their college-educated peers to have named these organizations as their main site of volunteering. About half of non-college youth who volunteered reported being asked

to serve by someone in the organization.<sup>32</sup> Although institutionalized opportunities for community service are fairly rare for young adults who do not attend college, about 5 percent of this population reports serving as a result of being recruited by someone in a service organization. This institutional infrastructure could be expanded.

The benefits to the volunteer in terms of motivations and skills depend on the quality of the service project itself. But some evidence suggests that engaging in volunteer work generally during the high school years causes young people to pause and reconsider their vocational priorities. For example, one panel study of a representative community sample found that taking part in community service strengthens intrinsic work values, leads youth to rethink their vocational priorities, and encourages a less individualistic focus on careers.<sup>33</sup> The potential civic benefits of time spent in community work during the late adolescent and young-adult years may be especially important because trends over the past three decades indicate that youth may be adapting to an unpredictable labor market by considering stable paid work less central to their identities.<sup>34</sup> As the transition to adulthood lengthens, community volunteer work may allow youth to become more relaxed about finding the "right job," at least "right away," and may help them to reevaluate what they are looking for in a job.

### Youth Organizing and Activism Projects

Over the past twenty years, scholars have begun paying closer attention to youth organizing and activism projects.

Activism as a form of civic engagement is distinct from service or volunteer work and from political advocacy on behalf of youth in that young activists themselves define

the political targets and lead the projects. Adults are involved as partners and train the younger generation in community organizing, analyzing power, developing skills, and devising strategies for institutional change. But the young people are the agents of change. And, typically, youth organizing and activism attract young people in marginalized communities who, collectively, are addressing issues that concern them. Prominent themes in youth activist projects include reform of public education and the poor quality of urban schools, community development projects to include marginalized youth and challenge gentrification, the criminal justice system, police brutality and racial profiling, and gender and sexual equality.

Youth activism also differs from service-learning and mainstream youth development programs in that it empowers young people to redress perceived injustice rather than to provide a community service. The model borrows heavily from community organizing, typically involves a critical analysis of social, political, and economic power, and emphasizes collective concerns identified by and actions led by young people to improve their everyday lives. Many projects draw from youth culture and educate the young people about the history of civil rights activism of their racial/ethnic group.

Both the practice and the study of youth organizing and activism have grown over the past several decades and focus on issues of school reform, incarceration, and community safety. Youth activism offers unique opportunities for political growth for youth whose interests and needs are too often marginalized by traditional youth organizations.<sup>35</sup> According to a two-year study of twelve community organizations—as part of the Youth Leadership for Development Initiative

of the Ford Foundation—activism tends to engage late adolescents and young adults, reframes “personal” problems of everyday life into “political” issues shared by a community, and provides challenge, leadership, and personal support comparable to or greater than that provided by conventional youth organizations.<sup>36</sup>

## Higher Education

As noted, young adults with college experience are much more civically engaged than their peers who do not attend college. This gap reflects the differing advantages and opportunities that accumulate from childhood on, but colleges and universities also directly strengthen the civic skills, motivations, and knowledge of their students through the courses and extracurricular opportunities that they offer. After all, the mission statements of most colleges and universities contain some reference to the civic preparation of younger generations.

Higher education is increasingly committed to a civic mission. One form that commitment takes is organized volunteering, already mentioned above, but it also includes community-based research, durable partnerships between colleges or universities and nearby community organizations, political discussion and debate on campus, courses that impart civic skills, student-produced news media, internships and study-abroad opportunities, and events and exhibitions meant to serve communities. Among the groups endorsing a broad civic mission are Campus Compact (a consortium of more than one thousand colleges and universities that have adopted principles of civic engagement), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ American Democracy Project, the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Core Commitments program,

and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' Civic Indicators project, to name a few. Likewise, over the past several decades, higher education has moved toward a public and outreach scholarship model of undergraduate education, one that integrates public and civic issues with courses in an undergraduate major.

As the transition to adulthood grows more protracted, this model of higher education may offer psychological benefits by helping students find purpose in roles other than the (often unpredictable) world of work and by helping them see that citizenship is not a part-time enterprise.<sup>37</sup>

Several of the forms of civic education offered on campuses have not been evaluated for their impact on students. But research does show that engaging in diversity workshops and socializing with diverse groups of peers, discussing social and political issues with fellow students, joining student organizations, and participating in learning communities and collaborative learning strengthen students' community orientation and commitments.<sup>38</sup> Service-learning courses that tie service to course content support students' commitment to social activism, their awareness of social and economic inequality and systemic causes of those inequities, and their personal feelings of social responsibility. In-depth studies using long-term data show that ambitious courses in which students analyze and address social problems increase civic knowledge and narrow gaps in civic engagement among students.<sup>39</sup>

The opportunities colleges offer for civic learning vary widely, with most of the variations reflecting differences in endowments and prestige. A study of 400 randomly recruited undergraduates at Ivy League universities, flagship state universities, and

selective liberal arts colleges found student experiences with civic engagement virtually universal and popular. By contrast, at non-selective public universities and poorly endowed private colleges, many students reported no civic engagement and low efficacy.<sup>40</sup>

The most affordable, most accessible, and most egalitarian institutions of higher education in the nation are community colleges. In 2005, these two-year colleges enrolled nearly 40 percent of all college students, including more than half of all minority and first-generation college students. Rough estimates are that 80 percent of community college students are the first in their families to attend college. Community colleges serve a far more diverse population than do four-year colleges. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, minority students account for 30 percent of enrollment. English as a Second Language courses are typical, reflecting the recent immigrant status of many of their students. Community colleges are thus a key institutional setting for recruiting into political life members of groups who now participate at lower levels.

Long-term analyses following eighth graders into young adulthood find very significant effects of attending two-year colleges on voting. According to Juliana Pacheco and Eric Plutzer, full-time enrollment in a four-year college would increase voting rates by 10 percent for whites, 10 percent for blacks, and 14 percent for Hispanics. But for African Americans, attending a two-year college half time would increase voting rates more than attending a four-year school full time.<sup>41</sup> A recent experimental study in Louisiana described in more detail in the article by Tom Brock in this volume provides a clue to potential mechanisms. This incentive

scholarship program combined with counseling for low-income, largely African American mothers in their mid-twenties raised the likelihood of registering to vote and of donating time or money to a political campaign. Students improved their course attendance and earned more credits; they also enjoyed other psychosocial benefits, such as feeling able to set and pursue personal goals, feeling a sense of purpose in life, and feeling that they have something positive to contribute.<sup>42</sup>

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### **The Military**

Given its potential personal costs, some would argue that military service is the highest form of civic engagement. Patriotism ranks high among the reasons recruits give for signing up, and time in the military may further imbue them with an ethic of civic participation and provide skills that can be used in peacetime service at home.

Studies indicate that, with the possible exception of veterans from the war in Vietnam, veterans are more likely than non-veterans to vote. Analyses of the 2005 Current Population Survey show that volunteering is higher among African American and Hispanic veterans than among the general public, but not among veterans overall.<sup>43</sup> Of those veterans who have served since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, on New York and

Washington, 25.1 percent reported volunteering in the United States in 2008.<sup>44</sup> Military training emphasizes group solidarity and works to overcome inter-group hostilities.

Military service in foreign wars since 2001 has provided both opportunities and challenges for the civic engagement of those who served. On one hand, the usual civic benefits of military service (such as socialization into norms of service and solidarity, and experiences of diversity) apply; and some military personnel abroad were involved in activities like planning reconstruction and relief programs and canvassing residents' needs that could provide useful civic skills back home. Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who spent most of their time on planning and reconstruction were slightly more likely to volunteer back home than those who took part in combat or medical assistance. They were especially involved with serving military families upon return.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, many returning veterans suffer from trauma or otherwise face challenges in reintegrating with civic communities. Veterans under the age of thirty are having a more difficult time transitioning back to civilian life than those who are thirty and older; 46.5 percent of veterans aged twenty-nine and younger agree or strongly agree that their transition is going well, as compared with 57 percent of veterans thirty and older. Younger veterans are slightly less likely than older veterans to have volunteered in civilian contexts.

Sources of support and civic incorporation for returning veterans include veterans' organizations and the military itself. More than half of current volunteering veterans have been asked to serve by a veterans' organization, and 78 percent of those who had been asked

to serve by a veterans' organization have volunteered since their return.<sup>46</sup>

### AmeriCorps Programs

AmeriCorps, created in 1993, is a federal funding stream for several large programs, including City Year, whose members devote a year to service through local community organizations and institutions. Participants, the vast majority of whom are under age thirty, provide service in exchange for a modest living stipend (enough to cover living expenses for most participants) and an educational award.

The intersection of developmental timing and institutional opportunities for service is evidenced by the upticks in program enrollment at ages eighteen and twenty-two, when youth typically finish high school or college. Contrary to popular stereotypes of corps members as college graduates, a sizable number of AmeriCorps members come from disadvantaged backgrounds: 36 percent of participants report having received public assistance or lived in public housing before their service work, indicating that national programs can provide opportunities for disadvantaged youth to connect with their communities. More analyses are needed, but AmeriCorps may be one route through which youth from disadvantaged circumstances can be empowered to improve their own lives through education and training and to improve their communities through their service work.

Does a year of service in AmeriCorps programs have civic benefit? A recent study by the Corporation for National and Community Service compared AmeriCorps participants with individuals who looked into but did not enroll in AmeriCorps and followed the two groups for eight years.<sup>47</sup> Findings from the study are suggestive, not definitive, because

the groups were not randomly assigned and the comparison group inquired about AmeriCorps but ultimately did not apply. The comparison group may have had alternative options that they pursued or the motivations of the two groups may have differed, or both.

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*AmeriCorps may be one route through which youth from disadvantaged circumstances can be empowered to improve their own lives through education and training and to improve their communities through their service work.*

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Nonetheless, the study identified several differences in civic involvement between the groups eight years after baseline. AmeriCorps participants felt more connected to their communities, had more identification with and understanding of problems within their communities, were more confident in their ability to work with the local government and lead a community-based movement, and participated more in community affairs. They were also more likely to be working in the public sector after completing their service, and they reported higher life satisfaction. Even eight years after joining the program, the civic outcomes of the AmeriCorps program persisted. Furthermore, subgroup analyses revealed that ethnic minority corps members and those from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely than their counterparts in the comparison group to be in careers in public service or the public sector. Other work shows positive relationships

between civic engagement and educational gains for youth in both the program and comparison groups. An evaluation of Youth Corps has also identified civic benefits for African American men. Besides positive benefits in education and employment, the evaluation also found increases in social and personal responsibility and in intentions to vote. Connecting with a supportive, caring adult and with better-educated individuals were among the explanations offered for the effects.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Internet**

The National Conference on Citizenship's 2008 Civic Health Index survey revealed gaps in civic engagement between young adults with and without college experience. Gaps in certain forms of *online* engagement, however, were smaller. For example, 57 percent of young adults with college experience, and 52 percent of young adults without college experience, said that they had used social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook to address social issues.<sup>49</sup> On six measures of online engagement, college youth were ahead of non-college youth, but these gaps were notably smaller than the gaps in traditional forms of engagement that were observed in the same survey.

According to the Civic Health Index, non-college youth who used various types of digital media (such as e-mail, Facebook or MySpace, posting videos online, text messaging other people, or watching a video of a presidential candidate) were between 10 and 40 percent more likely to volunteer than non-college youth who did not use these media.<sup>50</sup> To be sure, this correlation does not show that digital media cause volunteering rates to rise. But future research should investigate the potential of digital media to engage young people. In principle, the new

electronic media have several advantages. Barriers to entry are low, communities of interest are diverse and numerous, and peers can recruit one another for political or service activities even if they are physically dispersed.

### **Conclusion and Directions for Policy**

Civic engagement of young adults is important both for the functioning of a democratic society and for individual development. As generational replacement theories suggest, democracies depend on the social integration of successive younger generations into the body politic. For individual youth, civic engagement fulfills a need to belong and provides opportunities to work in concert with fellow citizens to realize shared ends. Through civic activities young generations come to appreciate their identities as members of the public. New generations get recruited into civic life by being in settings that offer opportunities to get engaged, to develop civic competencies, and to connect their lives with the lot of others.

But opportunities for civic engagement are not evenly distributed by social class or by racial and ethnic group, and wide disparities in political participation exist. As the transition to adulthood has lengthened, four-year colleges have become perhaps the central institution for civic incorporation of younger generations. They are heavily subsidized by public dollars, and no comparable institution exists for young adults who complete their education with a high school diploma or less. Institutions, such as unions, that once attempted to involve these youth in public affairs have diminished in reach.

Opportunities for sustained engagement by programs such as City Year could provide an alternative developmental path during the

prolonged transition to adulthood. When youth aged eighteen to twenty-five are asked what it means to them to be an adult, they cite responsibility for one's actions and awareness of others.<sup>51</sup> Their journey into adulthood could be more meaningful if society were to provide institutional opportunities for responsible civic engagement. Such opportunities could also compensate for the lack of occupational outlets, especially for forming careers, that many young adults face today.

Opportunities for sustained community engagement also could provide new norms or markers of mature adult behavior that young adults could use as a gauge for their own maturation. (Even without a steady job or life partner, it is still possible to be a responsible and committed member of one's community.) Society could also use civic activity as a new benchmark for assessing how this age group is faring. Finally, such "sustained civic activity" programs could be a new institutional model that would enable young adults from disadvantaged families to stay connected to mainstream opportunities and to adults who could mentor and guide their way.

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (P.L. 111-13), signed by President Barack Obama in April 2009, responds to several issues concerning civic engagement and the prolonged transition to adulthood. First, it increases the number of slots in AmeriCorps programs and adds new corps to address America's most pressing needs in health care, education, the environment, emergency preparedness, and public service. These new opportunities will enable corps members to work on civic issues and, at the same time, explore career options in expanding occupations. A year in an AmeriCorps program could become a pathway into adulthood and transform the episodic style of much of the

current youth engagement into a more sustained form.

Second, the legislation adds flexibility to ways that young people can get engaged in service and so is attuned to the balancing act that characterizes young adulthood today. For example, the National Civilian Conservation Corps will now have a non-residential component, which means that youth could focus on such things as disaster relief or energy conservation in the community where they grew up and still rely on the support of family and friends. Third, the education award, which has been a key element of AmeriCorps, is increased to \$5,350 (the amount of Pell grants) and can be applied to a wider range of institutions. Although the award remains small compared with the rising costs of education, these changes should make the program more attractive to youth at different stages in their educational career.

Fourth, and perhaps most important in our view, is that the legislation not only targets the needs of low-income communities but also makes the inclusion of marginalized youth a priority. For example, at least 50 percent of the participants in the National Civilian Conservation Corps must be youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (including youth in foster care) or represent the ethnic diversity of America. With respect to K-12 service learning, the law encourages a semester of service in high school, urges schools to tie service to local community needs, and also extends to sixth to twelfth graders the opportunity to earn income for a summer of community service. Although these efforts would hardly put a dent in the cumulative disadvantage that leads to inequalities in civic participation, they are steps in the right direction.



Accountability and innovation are integral to the goal of building the nation's volunteer infrastructure. Toward this end, the law includes a ten-year study of the benefits of service learning and directs the Census Bureau to conduct a national Civic Health Index. The law also includes capacity building for nonprofits, a social innovation fund, and training and technical assistance, especially for programs that mix youth with older adults.

The Kennedy Act represents an important investment but could be improved in several ways in the future. It forbids corps members from engaging in political activity of any sort. Thus, youth who become engaged in sustained efforts to address national needs as outlined in the legislation (safeguarding the environment, strengthening schools, improving health care in low-income communities) may not use the knowledge and experience gained in their service to work for policies that could potentially improve the very problems they are addressing in their volunteer service.

Further, the legislation provides nothing like a common curriculum or set of learning standards and objectives for AmeriCorps programs. The emphasis is on generating service hours and addressing social problems, but not making sure that participants obtain any specified set of civic skills or motivations. AmeriCorps would be more effective as a tool for civic engagement if, like the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, it aimed to teach democratic skills and was assessed on those terms.<sup>52</sup>

Overall, the evidence supports providing alternative civic learning opportunities for young adults not in college. AmeriCorps, especially if modified to become more educative and more open to politics, would be an important step, but would by no means suffice to close the civic engagement gap or to reverse declines since the 1970s.

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