

Measuring the Civic Participation of Adolescents

David E. Campbell

University of Notre Dame

dave_campbell@nd.edu

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This paper outlines indicators of civic participation for adolescents that (a) have a strong theoretical and empirical foundation within the extant literature and (b) are measurable, and can therefore be used to track the quantity, quality, and equity in civic participation among America's youth.

While the subject is too often given short shrift in discussions of education policy, America's schools have the mandate to produce active, informed members of a democratic society. To quote the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools:

Generations of leaders, from America's founders to the inventors of public education to elected leaders in the twentieth century, have understood that these qualities are not automatically transmitted to the next generation—they must be passed down through schools. Ultimately, schools are the guardians of democracy. (Gould et al. 2011, 6)

Historically, the very *raison d'être* of the public school system was to prepare youth for participation in a representative democracy, as illustrated by the fact that “forty state constitutions mention the importance of civic literacy among citizens, and thirteen of them state that a central purpose of their educational system is to promote good citizenship, democracy and free government” (Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement 2003, 5). In practice, every state has educational standards for social studies, a subject that includes civics (Godsay et al. 2012). Nor is a concern for civic participation limited to traditional public schools, as research shows that many charter, religious, and secular private schools also have a strong civic focus (D. E. Campbell 2001; Dee 2005; Buckley and Schneider 2007).

The benefits of an effective civic education are more than an abstraction, as recent events have shown how young people can be effective agents for social change. For example, the activism of students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, site of a horrific shooting, has focused public attention on school violence and gun control. It is no coincidence that these students attend a school within a district that prioritizes civic education, such as public speaking and debate. As forcefully stated by Dahlia Lithwick, “These kids aren't prodigiously gifted. They've just had the gift of a kind of education we no longer value” (2018).

Increased awareness of civic education is welcome since relevant data among American K-12 students are sparse and inconsistently collected, no doubt due to the fact that attention to civic outcomes pales in comparison to reading, writing, and the STEM subjects. For example, because of budget cutbacks the most recent civics exam of the National Assessment of Educational Progress

was only administered to 8th-graders, whereas in previous cycles it was taken by 4th and 12th graders as well (Sparks 2013) . Even when it has been administered to a wider range of students, the sample size of the NAEP civics exam has never been large enough to produce state or district-level results, making it impossible to compare performance in different education systems. And for all of its virtues as a well-designed assessment, the NAEP exam only measures one of the civic indicators described herein, namely civic knowledge. In addition to NAEP, the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement periodically conducts broad cross-national studies of civic education that cover more than knowledge, modeled after international exams in mathematics and science (TIMSS) and reading (PIRLS). Although the United States participated in the 1999 edition, it opted out in 2009 and 2016. In short, there is a paucity of civics-oriented data that has, in turn, limited the amount of research that has been conducted on precursors to civic participation, constraining scholars from making empirically-grounded policy recommendations to improve civic education. In light of the widespread concern in the United States about the quantity, quality, and equality of civic participation, the time is overdue for a renewed focus on how the nation’s schools are, and are not, fulfilling their mandate to prepare the nation’s young people to be informed, active citizens in a representative democracy.

To begin, it is necessary to define civic participation. This is no small task, as the literature with rife with different ways of defining and operationalizing the term, as well as related concepts like civic engagement, voluntarism, and social capital. Specifics vary but the literature finds consensus that the word civic implies “public spirited,” as distinct from activity motivated *primarily* for the benefit of the individual.¹ Furthermore, the literature generally distinguishes between two forms of public-spirited participation. The first, political activity, is directed toward affecting public policy. The second, civic activity, does not have shaping public policy as its primary motivation (D. E. Campbell 2006; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Zukin et al. 2006). By way of example, working in a soup kitchen would be defined as civic activity; contacting an elected official to express support for legislation regarding the homeless would be a political act. The nomenclature can be confusing because civic has two uses, referring both to all public-spirited activity, and to distinguish between political and nonpolitical activity. To borrow from biology, the term civic is used as both a genus and species. For the purposes of this paper, civic participation will be defined as voluntary collective action for the public good, which may or may not include direct efforts to affect public policy. In practice, the lines between the two types of participation are blurred, as they are highly

¹ This does not preclude the possibility, and empirical reality, that civic participation can benefit individuals—physically, mentally, socially, and even financially. One can do well by doing good.

correlated—people who engage in one type are also likely to engage in the other. It is thus appropriate to consider a common set of correlates for both species of nonpolitical and political activity, both of which will be subsumed under the genus of “civic participation.”

The scope of this paper is limited to adolescents, primarily secondary school students (grades 9-12). This is consistent with the extant literature, as most scholars of youth civic participation have focused on this age range. Developmentally, this is when most young people have developed the cognitive ability and social awareness for civic participation. Nonetheless, there are literatures on the civic development of both young children and college students, but comparatively little on youth who do not attend college following high school. Non-college attending youth represent a prime area for future research into the precursors of civic participation.

Outcomes

The literature on civic participation, especially among young people, is broad and multi-disciplinary, which is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, the multi-disciplinary nature of the subject attracts scholars from many different theoretical perspectives—political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, education—who employ a wide variety of methodologies. On the other hand, having multiple disciplinary approaches also means that scholars in this area are often working in parallel; their research moves alongside one another but never meets. This paper distills from these literatures the civic outcomes on which there is the broadest consensus across disciplines and methodological approaches. By far, most studies of adolescents’ civic participation rely on large-N surveys, sometimes longitudinal, and sometimes including interviews with parents as well. Very few studies of civic participation employ experimental methods or comparable identification strategies, and so questions regarding causation loom over the literature. Hopefully, increased attention to the civic dimension of secondary education will inspire further research explicitly designed to determine causality.

Voluntarism

There is a vast literature on the virtues of voluntarism, including membership in groups and associations, extending all the way back to Alexis de Tocqueville’s insights in his magisterial *Democracy in America*. Contemporary social science has generally confirmed what has come to be

called the neo-Tocquevillian perspective, with many scholars agreeing that voluntary associations are critical for the wellbeing of civil society (Putnam 1994, 2001; Stolle and Hooghe 2004; Paxton 2002; Brehm and Rahn 1997; Stolle 1998; Teorell 2003; Halpern 2005). Such associations build social capital, the networks and norms that foster generalized reciprocity and a strong sense of interpersonal trust. These networks can also lead to a self-reinforcing process of group members being mobilized into further civic activity—the more an individual is civically active, the more that person is invited to engage in more civic activity (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Lim 2008; Han 2014). Associations also provide opportunities to learn and practice what Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady (1995) call civic skills, by which they mean the ability to perform the actions necessary to engage in civic (including political) participation—public speaking, writing letters, running meetings.

For all the scholarship on groups that points to their benefits, keep in mind that not all associations are equally salubrious for civil society. Some forms of association are exclusionary, fostering in-group trust while promoting out-group distrust and even hostility. When assessing the state of associational life in America, it is important to note the types of associations that are more likely to foster connections across social divisions such as socioeconomic status, race, and religion.

Although rates of associational involvement in the United States remain high by international standards, the past generation has seen a marked drop-off in associationalism of all types, famously reflected in Robert Putnam's metaphor that Americans are "bowling alone." In the years since scholars such as Putnam first raised the alarm about declining associational life, online connections have risen in the wake of declining group memberships "in real life," leading to the question of whether online interactions replace, complement, or amplify sustained, face-to-face interactions in a group setting.

Association membership is related to volunteering for a public-spirited cause, as voluntarism entails many of the same positive externalities as participation in groups and associations, yet group membership and voluntarism are not the same thing. Some volunteering is done outside of formal groups. Some groups do not organize volunteer activity among their members, and even if they do, group members do not necessarily participate. Therefore, surveys of civic participation often distinguish between group membership and engagement in volunteer activity.

Voting

The fundamental act of citizen participation in any representative democracy is the vote. Voting is obviously the means by which elected officials are selected, but participation in the electoral process is also a form of civic participation and an expression of democratic legitimacy. In contrast to the US rate of association membership, which is high by global standards, Americans' voter turnout is relatively low. In recent presidential elections, voter turnout has averaged roughly 60 percent of the eligible population, while in congressional and other nonpresidential elections the rate is much lower still; overall turnout in the 2014 congressional elections was 37 percent.² Most—but by no means all—scholars of voting lament low turnout as problematic for the health of a democratic system, as an indicator of apathy and even a threat to the legitimacy of the electoral system (Macedo 2005; Patterson 2003). There are a variety of explanations for the low rate of U.S. voter turnout compared to other countries, including registration requirements that make it difficult to vote, the large number of elections that lead to voter fatigue, a two-party system that limits voter choice, gerrymandered electoral districts that lead to one-sided elections, and an Electoral College system that disincentivizes voters in non-battleground states.

Even more threatening to a democratic ideal than the low level of turnout is the inequality in who votes. All forms of civic participation are marked by inequalities defined along the lines of socioeconomic status, race, and age, but these inequalities are especially profound for voting, as elections determine who serves in elected office and makes public policy. In short, it matters who votes, not just how many vote. Numerous studies confirm that elected officials are most responsive to those constituencies who turn out to vote at high rates, typically voters with high socioeconomic status (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Griffin and Newman 2005).

Political Activity

Voting is only one of many ways that people can express political voice (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Dalton 2016; Zukin et al. 2006). Other forms of political activity include those related to campaigns, such as displaying campaign signs or buttons, volunteering for a campaign, and donating money to a campaign, candidate, or party. Beyond the electoral arena, people can also be involved in politics through organizations involved in political advocacy, whether at a national,

² Turnout calculated as a percentage of the voting eligible population. See <http://www.electproject.org/2014g>

state, or local level. Other forms of political activity include expressive acts such as protests and demonstrations, writing to or meeting with elected officials, boycotting and “boycotting” (choosing businesses on the basis of politics); and expressing opinions publicly through online or print sources.

Today, social media have blurred the line between public and private political talk. Whereas, in the past, it was easy to distinguish between political opinions expressed among friends and family in conversation and those aired publicly through such means as letters to the editor or calls made to talk radio programs, with social media these distinctions are less clear. Is a Facebook post a form of public or private expression? What about a tweet?

Given the myriad ways that people can be involved in politics, scholars have developed multiple ways of classifying forms of political participation. Examples include electoral versus political voice; solitary versus communal; time-based versus money-based; and dutiful versus actualized. In developing a set of indicators, these distinctions are less important than ensuring that the measures are comprehensive, capturing a wide range of political activity. In particular, a focus on youth compels attention to measures of political expression via social media. This is a challenge, since online platforms come and go—for evidence, see surveys done a decade ago that refer to MySpace. Developing measures that will hold up over time, however, is vital for the full picture of youth political engagement, especially since there is evidence that political expression via social media is not as sharply divided by race and class as other forms of political activity. In fact, Cohen et al. find that for some forms of online political activity, African American youth are more engaged than their white peers.

[B]lack youth generally participate at rates equal to or slightly higher than other groups in various online acts of participatory politics, such as starting or joining a political group on a social network site; forwarding or posting someone else’s political commentary; contributing their own article, opinion piece, picture, or video; commenting on a news story or blog read online; or participating in an event where young people express their political views. (Cohen et al. 2012, 25)

Anecdotal evidence abounds that young people have been highly engaged online around issues such as DACA, Black Lives Matter, and gun control. With well-designed measurement, these anecdotes can be put to the empirical test—how engaged are young people? And does their online participation move offline into organizing and voting?

Knowledge

Accurate knowledge about the workings of government goes hand-in-hand with voter turnout. As important as who votes is what voters know, although the depth and scope of knowledge necessary for an informed electorate is a matter of debate among social scientists (Lupia 1998, 1994; Popkin 1994; Converse 1964; Caplan 2008; Brennan 2016). The subject of voters' knowledge has long occupied scholars of democracy, but has taken on a new urgency in light of widespread concerns about widely circulating misinformation and outright falsehoods, most famously during the 2016 presidential election. Not in dispute is the fact that most people do poorly when asked "top of the head" factual questions about current affairs and the processes of government (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). The significance of these relatively low levels of knowledge, though, is very much in dispute. Some scholars dismiss their importance and argue that voters acquire the information they need to make informed choices through information shortcuts, such as party labels, group endorsements, and consulting opinion leaders with specific expertise within their personal social network (e.g. asking a teacher about education policy) (Lupia 2016). In short, one school of thought holds that voters manage to learn what they need to know, which is not necessarily reflected in quiz-like batteries of factual questions.

For all the debate over levels of knowledge within the electorate, it would be an exaggeration to say that there is no consensus within the literature. The disagreement is over the *upper* level of knowledge required for a well-functioning democracy, but few dispute that voters should have a minimum level of information in order to make informed political decisions, especially when voting. In the words of William Galston:

[T]here are signs of an emerging consensus. Competent democratic citizens need not be policy experts, but there is a level of basic knowledge below which the ability to make a full range of reasoned civic judgments is impaired. (2001, 218)

Civic knowledge is important for its own sake and therefore a significant civic outcome. However, there is also suggestive evidence that greater knowledge also leads to greater civic, and especially political, participation. Conclusive evidence for a causal effect is lacking but at a minimum there is a strong correlation between knowledge and participation—more of one means more of the other (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Untangling the precise causal relationship is difficult, but the data suggest that knowledge and participation are in a mutually-reinforcing relationship, whereby knowledge begets participation and participation begets knowledge.

Cognitive Engagement

Establishing knowledge as a critical civic outcome naturally leads to the question of how people acquire such knowledge. Formal education is one means. Another is through cognitive engagement with politics, which includes both consuming political news and engaging in political discussion with others.

Cognitive engagement is important as a precursor to civic knowledge although, once again, the direction of the causal arrow is ambiguous: does engagement feed knowledge or the other way around? Yet even putting aside the question of its causal relationship to knowledge (which, recall, has an ambiguous causal relationship to participation), cognitive engagement is an important civic indicator in its own right. It is through news consumption and discussion that people can be exposed to differing points of view, which can either lead to greater conviction or compromise. Either way, cognitive engagement means a deeper investment in politics, which in turn contributes to the accountability of elected officials, as citizens are more aware of their doings and the consequences of the policies they enact.

Social scientists have known for decades that people have a tendency toward self-reinforcement in the information they consume, both preferring news sources that echo their ideological predispositions and interpreting information—even that which is negative or neutral—to reinforce their own opinions (A. Campbell et al. 1960; Bartels 2002; Jerit and Barabas 2012). In recent years, these tendencies have been accentuated by the advent of social media as a source of political information, and overtly partisan news sources. Furthermore, Americans appear to be less likely to interact socially with people who have a different political perspective, reducing opportunities for political discussion across political lines (Bishop and Cushing 2009; Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

In light of concerns that Americans are increasingly hunkering down into ideological bunkers, it is not enough to measure the quantity of news consumption and political discussion. Important also is to determine whether that news is being consumed critically: do consumers gauge the potential bias of the news source, and do they seek out information from differing perspectives? Likewise, are political discussions held with people who have differing perspectives, whether online or “in real life”? Conversations across ideological divides are especially important, given evidence that political cross-talk fosters greater tolerance for those of differing views (Mutz 2006).

Correlates

The existing literature has identified a wide variety of factors known to affect the civic participation of adolescents, from the home to the neighborhood. In winnowing down the long list of potential factors, this paper includes both what happens within schools, where the most feasible and effective policy interventions can be directed, and within communities, where policy interventions are more difficult to implement.

In general, these correlates are a classic example of what is sometimes called the Matthew effect, named for the verse in the biblical book of Matthew that “unto every one that hath shall be given.”³ Independent of what happens in schools, adolescents of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be civically engaged, owing to their exposure to high levels of civic engagement within their social networks, including their families and neighborhoods. Compounding that “pre-existing condition” of advantage, some of these correlates are more likely to be experienced by students with greater social status. It would be wrong, though, to conclude that the Matthew effect is the whole story, as it is counterbalanced by the compensation effect—the wealth of evidence that some aspects of students’ experience at school can compensate for a lack of civic resources in the family and neighborhood (Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets 2016).

The discussion below describes what is known about inequalities in civic participation, particularly that of adolescents. While there are some exceptions, in general the greatest disparities are found along the lines of class, not race—a finding consistent with longstanding research into the civic participation of adults.

School-Level Factors

Schools vary widely in the civic opportunities they provide to their students, ranging from differences in the classes offered, instructional styles, extracurricular activities, student involvement in school governance, disciplinary policies, and a general civic ethos. While, as detailed below, there are examples of civic education practices that ameliorate racial and class divides in civic engagement, schools often serve to exacerbate those divides. In an analysis that incorporates three surveys of school-level civic opportunities, two in California and one nationwide, Kahne and Middaugh (Kahne and Middaugh 2009) find that schools often serve to magnify socioeconomic biases in two ways. First, there is an inter-school effect. Schools attended by students with lower

³ Matthew 25:29 (King James Version); the precise phrasing varies by biblical translation.

socioeconomic status are less likely to provide high-quality civic education, including classroom discussion (detailed below), public speaking, extra-curricular activities, simulations, and service learning. Second, there is also an intra-school effect, as high-SES students within a school are more likely to be given civic opportunities.

One clear and consistent set of relationships was observed in all three studies: students who are more academically successful and those with parents of higher socioeconomic status receive more classroom-based civic learning opportunities. . . Rather than helping to equalize the capacity and commitments needed for democratic participation, teachers appear to be exacerbating this inequality by providing more preparation for those who are already likely to attain a disproportionate amount of civic and political voice. (42-43)

In other words, they find evidence of the Matthew effect. However, Kahne and Middaugh also find that schools have the potential to compensate for civic disparities. Using data from a longitudinal study of Chicago-area youth, they estimate that having civic opportunities available at school⁴ can boost an otherwise disengaged youth's level of civic engagement from the 16th to the 68th percentile.

It will perhaps come as no surprise that schools serving students with low socioeconomic status have fewer civic opportunities. However, the literature awaits a more thorough study of other ways that schools, and districts, differ in the civic learning they provide to their students. Possible factors to explore include the size and organization of the school, the political climate of the school board, and the availability of school choice (vouchers, charter schools, intra- or inter-district choice).

There are still other ways that the school as an institution can affect the civic attitudes and behavior of young people. Building on the growing literature that examines how individuals' interactions with the state shapes their relationship to government, and thus their likelihood of being civically engaged, Bruch and Soss (2018) demonstrate that school disciplinary practices serve as a "hidden curriculum" for students. They find that young people who are disciplined with suspension or expulsion are less likely to trust government and to vote following their high school years. Here again we see evidence of the Matthew effect, as minority students—especially African American males—are the most likely to report being disciplined.

Disciplinary policies are one example of a school's "ethos," which refers to the values reinforced within the school, either implicitly or explicitly. Other aspects of a school's ethos also

⁴ Specifically, "service learning, an open classroom climate, exposure to role models, and discussion of problems in society and ways to respond" (Kahne and Middaugh 2009, 51).

matter for civic development. Campbell (2006), for example, finds that attending a high school with a richer civic ethos—measured by the percentage of students who endorse voting as essential for being a good citizen—correlates with a higher rate of both voting and community volunteering fifteen years after graduation, even when controlling for the individual’s proclivity toward civic participation. The importance of the school climate is consistent with the social capital literature, which suggests that people adopt the social norms within their environment (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Putnam, 2001). In a more localized study of high school students in the Baltimore-Washington area, Gimpel et al. (2003) also find evidence that the school ethos matters; adolescents were more politically engaged and efficacious when they felt that their school’s policies were fair. Similarly, Kahne and Sporte find that school ethos—including whether students feel a sense of belonging to the school—has a positive effect on adolescents’ civic activity (2008).

Classroom Discussion

Across the many disciplines and methodologies employed to study adolescents’ civic participation, arguably the most consistent finding is the importance of enlivening classroom discussion of political and social issues, or what is often called an open classroom climate (Hess 2009; Hess and Posselt 2002; Hooghe and Dassonneville 2011; Persson 2015; Torney-Purta 2002; Knowles and McCafferty-Wright 2015). Specifically, numerous studies find that when students participate in the discussion of controversial issues with teachers who respect their opinions, they become more knowledgeable about current affairs and more likely to be civically engaged. In the words of a recent collection on civic education:

Existing research of different types, in different places, and by different scholars converges on the importance of discussing contrasting viewpoints within the classroom and is buttressed by a strong theoretical basis for why such discussion is effective. Exposure to, and interest in, dialogue appears to lead to greater political knowledge and interest. Some of the increase in knowledge and interest likely results because conflict is intrinsically interesting and thus catches the attention of distractible teenagers. But interest in conflict is probably not the whole story. Classroom discussion is also conceivably an effective pedagogical technique because it exposes students to more information than do lectures, worksheets, movies, or other methods of civics instruction, and this greater quantity of information is matched by higher quality of instruction. In addition to its efficacy for enhancing cognitive learning, a well-moderated discussion of contentious questions also teaches students that politics is about resolving disagreements and, hopefully, models the use of civil discourse. (D. E. Campbell, Levinson, and Hess 2012, 9)

The positive impacts of an open classroom climate is especially pronounced among students of low socioeconomic status, an example of the compensation effect (D. E. Campbell 2008).

An open climate is more common in racially homogeneous classrooms, suggesting that teachers are reluctant to raise controversial issues in racially diverse contexts (D. E. Campbell 2007). This finding presents a challenge for civic educators, as it means that students in racially mixed classrooms are not exposed to such discussion, which limits their exposure to the viewpoints of students from a different racial background. In other words, those who would likely benefit the most from such discussions are the least likely to experience them.

Although there is virtual consensus on the importance of an open classroom climate, that leaves open the question of both the validity of its measurement. Hart and Youniss (2018), for example, express skepticism that adolescents' self-reports of classroom climate reflect anything more than their predisposition to civic engagement. If their critique is correct, it would mean that any effects attributed to classroom practices merely reflect students' individual characteristics. In other words, the classroom experience does not matter after all.

Hart and Youniss point to what they describe as “modest agreement” among students within a given classroom about its climate, drawing on a study by Barber, Sweetwood, and King (2015) of the IEA CivEd study. However, this is not at all what Barber et al. conclude. While they do find variability in the perceived climate among students within the same classroom, the variation is concentrated within classrooms with a low average level of openness. “Students seem to agree with each other when a classroom is the most open to discussion of different ideas” (208). This suggests that in classrooms where there is little discussion overall, some students are more likely than others to report a higher degree of openness—no doubt because they are the students who are most likely to speak up. It is precisely because of this individual-level variation that at least two studies of classroom climate account for students' differing perceptions by “purging” the correlation between the individual and the classroom so that they are orthogonal (D. E. Campbell 2008; Persson 2015). In other words, the aggregated measure of classroom climate is independent of the individual student's own perception, and thus of her taste for political discussion.

Econometric fixes aside, the most compelling validation of survey-based measurement of classroom climate combine qualitative observations with quantitative measures. In their mixed-method study of classroom discussion, Hess and McAvoy found that their assessment of teachers who engage in a high level of discussion matched the responses in student surveys (2015, 48).

Even though the existing measures of classroom climate have both face and convergent validity, this is not to say that they cannot be improved. The criticism of Hart and Youniss should be taken to heart, as they can no doubt be refined further—yet another reason why more high-fidelity data on civic education is required.

Extra-curricular Activities

Next to classroom discussion, arguably the leading factor predicting adolescents' civic participation in adulthood is participation in extra-curricular activities while in high school. Numerous studies have found that youth who participate in nearly all extra-curricular activities—sports being a notable exception—grow into adults who engage in civic participation. The long-term “civic boost” from such activity is greatest among adolescents who participate in groups that have an explicitly civic component. For example, McFarland and Thomas analyze the National Educational Longitudinal Study and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and conclude:

membership experiences in politically salient youth organizations (e.g., service organizations, student council, drama clubs, musical groups, and religious organizations) have modest, significant, additive, positive effects on adult political participation, and net of indirect and direct effects of social background characteristics. (McFarland and Thomas 2006, 418)

(Note their expansive definition of “politically salient” organizations, as they include drama, religious, and musical groups). This study is representative of the literature, as the essential finding that extra-curricular activity in adolescence predicts group membership in adulthood is affirmed in multiple studies using a wide array of data sources and multiple indicators of civic participation (Beck and Jennings 1982; Plutzer 2002; Smith 1999; Glanville 1999; Kahne and Sporte 2008; Smith 1999). Nonetheless, questions about the causal effect of extra-curricular activity remain, as to date there has not been a large-scale, longitudinal, controlled experiment by which adolescents are randomly assigned to participate in extra-curriculars. In the absence of such a study, one cannot rule out the possibility that people who are naturally, perhaps even genetically (Fowler, Baker, and Dawes 2008) inclined toward civic participation as adults are drawn to extra-curricular activity as adolescents. The fact that the biggest effects on adults' participation are found for membership in groups with political salience (broadly defined), once again leaves the causal question ambiguous. Do such groups kindle an interest that is manifested in civic participation later in life? Or do they simply reflect a civic predisposition?

Although the jury is out on the precise nature of any causal relationship between adolescents' extra-curricular activity and adult civic participation, the robustness of the correlational evidence affirms that extra-curriculars should be included in any assessment of young people's civic participation. Whatever the causal relationship, the data are clear that there is a sharp socioeconomic divide in extra-curricular participation, with such activity more prevalent among youth from more-educated families. As detailed by Kawashimi-Ginsberg (2014), there are a variety of reasons for this disparity, including the fact that many extra-curricular activities require out-of-pocket expenses beyond the reach of many working-class homes. In addition, many working-class teens live in neighborhoods with fewer resources to support extra-curricular activities and working-class parents often do not prioritize structured activities for their children (Lareau 2011). Regardless of the underlying causes, the empirical fact remains that extra-curricular activities are a quintessential example of the Matthew effect—youth who are already socially advantaged are more likely to participate, further compounding the class gap in civic participation. Furthermore, this class gap is a relatively new development. As recently as the early 1990s, extra-curricular participation was not so sharply differentiated by social class, likely a reflection that many high-SES teens pursue extra-curricular activities to bolster their college applications (Putnam 2015).

Related to extra-curricular activity is adolescents' volunteering which, like voluntarism among adults, may or may not be organized through a group or association. According to the annual Monitoring the Future study, a massive, nationally-representative survey of high school students, volunteering is more common among teens now than in the 1980s—a sharp contrast to other forms of extra-curricular activity, which have declined over the same period. Far from representing an across-the-board increase in volunteering, though, this increase is driven almost entirely by high-SES students, another reflection of the drive to enhance college applications (Kawashimi-Ginsberg 2014). Like other forms of extra-curricular activity, volunteering in adolescence is also a correlate of later civic participation (D. E. Campbell 2006), but the same concerns about self-selection cloud whether the impact is causal in nature.

A number of teens also experience service learning. In general, service learning consists of volunteering done under the auspices of a course or, in some areas, as a graduation requirement. There are many studies of service-learning but little of the extant research is experimental, leading to the same questions about causation as extra-curricular activity and volunteering in general (Billig, Root, and Jesse 2005; Morgan and Streb 2001; Kirilin 2002; Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman 2000)(Billig, Root, and Jesse 2005; Morgan and Streb 2001; Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman 2000). The literature has found that some types of service learning are more likely to be correlated with

young people's civic engagement than others. Specifically, the most effective service learning is integrated into a curriculum, includes reflection on the service done by the teen, and—further reinforcing the importance of classroom climate—incorporates discussion of the teens' experiences into the classroom.

To date, the literature is silent on whether the effects of community service on civic participation depend on the motivation for the service. It could be that instrumentally-motivated voluntarism inspires altruistic behavior, it could engender cynicism, or it could have no long-term effect at all. Nor is it clear whether requiring service from teens leads them to participate in voluntarism beyond what is required. One study has found that overall voluntarism among teenagers declined in Maryland after the state implemented a mandatory community service requirement for graduation from high school, suggesting that the required service crowds out voluntary activity (Helms 2013). This one study, however, is not the final word. More research is needed into the causes and consequences of youth voluntarism.

Civic Skills

In their pioneering work, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) demonstrate that a major reason for social inequalities in civic participation is the uneven distribution of one particular resource, civic skills. As they use the term, civic skills refer to the ability to perform the functions essential to civic activity, such as speaking in public, organizing and running meetings, and writing correspondence. In their words:

ordinary and routine activity on the job, at church, or in an organization, activity that has nothing to do with politics or public issues, can develop organizational and communications skills that are relevant for politics and can thus facilitate political activity. (18).

These skills are common among the college-educated, as they are essential to most white-collar jobs. In contrast, working-class occupations often do not require these skills. As a result, civic skills are more common among people with a higher socioeconomic status. Yet, importantly, Verba et al. also show that there are institutions in society that compensate for the uneven distribution of civic skills. Specifically, many places of worship and unions provide opportunities for the non-college educated to develop civic skills (with the former far more common than the latter). Among adolescents, schools can provide the same compensation by equalizing opportunities to learn civic skills. These include communication and organizational skills that translate directly to civic participation, such as writing letters, giving presentations, and running meetings. In a compelling

longitudinal study, Condon (2015) finds that student with strong verbal skills are more likely to vote, work on political campaigns, and participate in civic organizations in early adulthood

While the existing evidence has suggested a causal link between civic skills and participation among adolescents, the amount of data collected on the acquisition of such skills by adolescents is limited. Encouragingly, the available data suggests that there are not racial disparities in civic skills learned in school. In a relatively small national survey of adolescents conducted in 2016 (N=997) there were few racial differences in the practice of civic skills in school.⁵ There are, however, relatively wide differences by socioeconomic status, as measured by parental education, for giving a speech and participating in a debate (but not writing a letter).⁶ This, of course, mirrors the acquisition of civic skills among the adult population, suggesting that high-SES adolescents are more likely to be enrolled in schools, and/or courses within their schools, that provide experience in public speaking, debate, and deliberation.

What About Civics Curriculum?

Each of the correlates above has been selected because they lend themselves to the measureable indicators described below, but they do not exhaust what is known about the factors contributing to civic participation. For example, one might wonder about the role of the formal civics curriculum.⁷ For many years, the conventional wisdom within the literature was that civics

⁵ Results from the “Family Matters” survey, conducted by the author. The survey consists of a nationally-representative sample of 997 adolescent-parent pairs. Eighteen percent of White students said that as a school assignment they had written a letter to someone they did not know, compared to 21 percent of African American students and 19 percent of Hispanics. Hispanics were a little less likely to say that they had given a speech or oral report (56 percent) than either Whites (63 percent) or African Americans (61 percent) but, conversely, Hispanics were the most likely (55 percent) to say that they had taken part in a debate or discussion (51 percent of White students, 52 percent of African Americans).

⁶ Also from the Family Matters survey: of students who have a parent with post-graduate education, 63 percent have taken part in a debate or discussion, compared to 45 percent of those whose parent(s) have a Bachelor’s degree and 48 percent who have some college. Interestingly, among students whose parent(s) have a high school education or less, 57 percent have participated in a debate. The pattern is similar for giving a speech or oral report—highest among students whose parent(s) have education beyond the Bachelor’s degree (71 percent), and declining with lower parental education (Bachelor’s, 64 percent; Some college, 57 percent; High school or less, 52 percent).

⁷ Courses that cover government, politics, and current affairs go by many different titles, including social studies, government, and civics. This discussion groups them all under the common label of civics.

courses did not have an effect on adolescents' civic participation, a conclusion that stemmed from a landmark article published by Kenneth Langton and M. Kent Jennings fifty years ago (1968). In subsequent years, that conclusion has been refuted, as others have found small but statistically significant effects on civic knowledge for students who have taken a civics course in high school (Niemi and Junn 1998). As for other civic indicators, a recent review essay examined an array of studies into civics courses and concluded that, on balance, there is no consensus that civics courses lead to greater civic and political activity (Manning, Nathan and Edwards 2014).

It is not entirely accurate, though, to conclude that Langton and Jennings found no effects for a civics curriculum. While it is true that they found no general effects, they did find that African American students who had taken a high school civics course were more civically engaged, according to an array of indicators. This was an early example of the compensation effect, as they hypothesized that African American students came from homes with fewer civic resources, especially in light of the fact that, at the time, African Americans had been excluded from full political participation in much of the country. The civic education at school compensated for a lack of civic learning in the home. Further evidence for compensation comes from the work of Neundorff et al. (2016), who find that youth who experience little political discussion in the home receive a boost in their political engagement from taking a civics course—an effect that lasts for decades following high school.

Related to the question about the effectiveness of civics classes is the potential impact of including civics as an examination subject for graduation from high school, comparable to high-stakes exams in other subjects such as reading, math, and science. Campbell and Niemi find evidence that high school students in states that require passage of a high-stakes civics exam to graduate from high school score better on the NAEP civics exam (2016). More convincing, though, is the evidence that when states adopt a high-stakes civics test, Latino students' NAEP scores rise. Further evidence shows that these effects persist past high school as millennial-age Latinos, and especially Latino immigrants, have higher levels of civic knowledge if they were educated in states with a high-stakes civics exam for high school graduation. These results are another confirmation of the compensation effect, as it is likely that Latinos, particularly those from immigrant homes, have fewer civic resources at home and, accordingly, benefit most from civics instruction in school.⁸ But they only seem to benefit when their civic education has consequences for graduation. The mechanism to explain this result is not clear, as further analysis does not indicate that civics

⁸ See Callahan and Muller (2013) for complementary research into the civic education of immigrants in secondary schools.

instruction is any more likely to include classroom discussion, research projects on social issues, or a require keeping up with the news. It may be because either administrators, teachers, students, or parents—or a combination—take civics more seriously when it is an exam subject.

In light of what is known and not known regarding civics instruction and evaluation, this paper recommends that in addition to the individual-level indicators described below, any monitoring of civic indicators also include data on the civics requirements required within a given student's state and/or district. This would enable further research on the potential links between civics courses, state-mandated exams, and the various indicators of civic participation. For a model, see the interactive map provided of state civics requirements available at [civicyouth.org](https://civicyouth.org/new-interactive-map-explores-civic-education-state-by-state): <https://civicyouth.org/new-interactive-map-explores-civic-education-state-by-state>.

Neighborhood Effects

While the emphasis within the literature on youth civic engagement has been the effect of civic education in the schools, young people are shaped by factors beyond the school as well. For example, Gimpel, Lay, and Shuknecht (2003) find that the level of political competitiveness within a community affects the level of political engagement among high school students—more competition leads to more engagement—while Pacheco (2008) finds that being socialized in a more politically competitive community has a long-term effect on voter turnout. On the other hand, Campbell (2006) adds that areas with relatively little competition can foster voter turnout motivated by civic duty. Either way, the local political context matters.

Other neighborhood effects include the level of social capital within a community, including access to civic organizations (Putnam 2001; Halpern 2005). In a recent report, researchers at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) have coined the term “civic deserts”—analogous to food deserts—to describe communities where young people perceive few opportunities to be civically engaged (Kawashimi-Ginsberg and Sullivan 2017; Atwell, Bridgeland, and Levine 2017). In my correspondence with Kei Kawashimi-Ginsberg, who originated the term civic desert, she further explained that they operationalize a civic desert as whether someone reports having “easy physical access” to arts and entertainment organizations, youth programs, colleges, and early childhood programs. She stressed that civic deserts are not limited to rural areas because many people in urban centers, including 30 percent of urban millennials, either lack transportation to such organizations or are unaware of their availability.

Frankly, the study of neighborhood effects on youth civic engagement is in its infancy, limited by the paucity of available data. If there were to be a large-scale, nationally-representative study of youth civic engagement, it would be fruitful to link the individual-level data to other data sources, such as the American Community Survey and administrative records on, for example, nonprofit organizations. Unlike civic education in schools, it is difficult to design policy interventions to affect the neighborhood context in which young people are socialized. Nonetheless, civic education programs can benefit from an awareness of how the local context shapes the attitudes of young people, and perhaps partner with local organizations to connect youth with the civic opportunities within their community.

Indicators

As has been noted, the study of civic participation within the nation's secondary schools has long been hampered by a lack of systematic data on multiple indicators collected on a regular basis. It would thus be a boon for researchers and policymakers alike to have an annual survey of secondary school students focused on their preparation for civic participation.

There are two models for such a study. One is to conduct it in the schools, which ideally would include traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, and—if possible—including homeschooled students as well (many home-schoolers participate in local networks, making it feasible to find and survey them). The chief advantage of this approach is a high response rate (since students are given the survey at school) and the ability to construct school and classroom-level measures, comparable to the IEA CivEd study. In addition to CivEd, another useful model for a school-based survey is the longstanding and highly successful Monitoring the Future study, an annual nationwide survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students that is primarily designed to track the prevalence of drug and alcohol use, but which contains questions about other behaviors and attitudes as well.⁹

One possibility for a school-based study would be to add a more detailed survey to the existing NAEP Civics Exam. While, in principle, this approach could work, in practice it seems unlikely and perhaps even unwise. First, NAEP is an exam, and thus is limited to measuring civic knowledge only. While the NAEP assessment is rigorous, knowledge is only one slice of civic engagement. Furthermore, the precariousness of NAEP funding has recently been demonstrated by

⁹ For more details on the Monitoring the Future study, see <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/>

the decision to cut funding for the most recent exam to 8th grade only. Given the political climate, it seems likely that introducing subjective measures to NAEP would only put its funding in further jeopardy, as suggested by the periodic attempts by some members of Congress to end National Science Foundation funding for political science research. However, even if a survey could be added to the NAEP exam, there are further impediments to its utility as a source of data. Compared to other NAEP subjects, the civics exam is done on a smaller scale, precluding state-level comparisons. Perhaps most importantly, the rules governing the acquisition and analysis of the individual-level data are extremely onerous, owing to the strict data privacy provisions of the Department of Education. For example, not only are collaborators at different institutions unable to share the dataset, they are not allowed to share the output of their results with one another without each table first being approved by the staff of the National Center for Education Statistics. (This includes basic statistical results, such as cross-tabulations, regression models, and the like). These policies are not a recipe for the widespread and creative use of the data. By way of comparison, obtaining and using NAEP data is far more difficult than other national data sources, including data from adolescents.

In other words, the effective measurement of youth civic engagement will be best accomplished with a new source of data, designed from the ground up for the purpose of tracking young people's attitudes and behavior, and without the constraints imposed by piggybacking onto NAEP or any other existing source of data.

The second model for data collection is a national survey of teens conducted by a survey firm with experience collecting data from adolescents directly (likely through online surveys). This sort of survey can be done relatively inexpensively, although compared to a school-based survey it is more difficult to achieve a high response rate. It also eliminates the possibility of constructing school or classroom-level measures, since the respondents will not be clustered within schools. Logistically, the advantage of such a study is that it is not subject to the vagaries of access being granted by administrators. Methodologically, one advantage to such methodology is the possibility of including parents, which is feasible but very difficult to do with a school-based survey. Including parents enables the study of how home and school interact. There are precedents for such a study, including the National Household Education Survey of 1996 and 1999, both of which were conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and focused on civic involvement. The 1996 NHES

included interviews with both adolescents and their parents; the 1999 edition was limited to adolescents.¹⁰

Either model for a study of youth civic participation would entail a survey. Below I describe a series of indicators that such a survey instrument could include, along with sample questions drawn from existing research. These questions are only meant to be illustrative, not definitive, as in each case there are multiple examples within the literature that could be adopted.

Voter Registration

The first indicator is both the most basic and most important: voter registration. Are eligible adolescents registered to vote? *If only one indicator were adopted, it should be voter registration.*

Most importantly, registration is a prerequisite for voting, but its importance does not end there. By registering to vote, a citizen gains familiarity with the voting process and becomes more likely to be mobilized by parties, groups, and candidates. Laws vary, but in many states nearly all high school seniors are able to register to vote before graduating even if they have not yet turned eighteen, as registration is often available to seventeen year olds.

The most straightforward way to determine if someone is registered to vote is to ask directly on a survey. Owing to the social desirability associated with voting, such questions are typically couched in language to provide “cover” for a negative response, such as in the example below, drawn from the National Youth Survey (Zukin et al. 2006).

Many people are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Would official state records show that you are now or are not registered to vote in your precinct district?

Are registered/Are not registered/Don't know what records would show

Voter registration is a rare example of a civic behavior that can be confirmed externally, as voter registration is a matter of public record. It is possible to validate individuals' voter registration status by cross-referencing their name (and whatever other demographic information is available) against publicly-available state voter files. Obviously, this requires knowing the name of the survey respondent, which would require strict confidentiality of the data collected. There is precedent for

¹⁰ The NHES civic involvement studies are described here: https://nces.ed.gov/nhes/surveytopics_special.asp

validating voter registration, as this has been done for national surveys like the National Election Studies and the Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

Classroom Climate and Civic Skills

As noted above, while there are commonly-used measures of classroom climate, there is still debate over their validity. The index below was adapted from the IEA's CivEd study, a cross-national survey of civic education.¹¹ Given the emphasis placed on classroom climate within the literature, it would be prudent to conduct further validation studies, complete with in-class observations—to determine if these measures need further refining.

I feel free to disagree openly with my teachers about political and social issues during class

My teachers encourage me to make up my own mind about political and social issues

My teachers respect my opinions and encourage me to express them during class

My teachers present several sides of an issue when explaining it in class

Never/Rarely/Sometimes/Often

There are also widely used measures of civic skills and courses that cover government and/or public affairs. These can be combined into a single index.

This year, have you done any of the following things in any class at school?

Learned about the government or the Constitution of the United States?

Learned about current political events

Written a letter to someone you did not know

Given a speech or an oral report

Taken part in a debate or discussion in which you had to persuade others about your point of view

Yes/No

¹¹ The IEA scale also includes “My teachers express their social and political opinions to me,” but for the purposes of measuring the degree to which *students* experience an open climate this item is less relevant.

Extra-Curricular Activities/Volunteering

Questions designed to measure participation in extra-curricular activities are straightforward, although it is important to differentiate among extra-curriculars, as not every type of activity correlates equally with civic participation later in life and participation in sports correlates not at all. Below are examples of such items, taken from Kahne and Sporte (2008). There is no single “industry standard” for such items, and so other questions are likely to work just as well.

This year, how often have you participated in school clubs or after-school activities (student council, drama, ethnic/cultural clubs, newspaper, etc.)?

This, how often have you participated in activities organized OUTSIDE of school (classes or programs at Boys/Girls Club, park program, religious youth group¹²)?

This year, how often have you participated in sports teams, either in school or out of school (while in season)?

Never/Once in a while/Once a week/Almost every day

In addition to extracurricular activities, it is also important to ask separately about volunteering. As with extra-curriculars, the literature provides multiple examples of such questions with varying levels of detail. One such example is provided below, adapted from the National Civic Engagement Survey (Zukin et al. 2006).

Have you ever spent time participating in any community service or volunteer activity, or haven't you had time to do this? By volunteer activity, I mean actually working in some way to help others for no pay.

Yes/No

If Yes: How often have you participated in community service or volunteer activity?

Never/Once in a while/Once a week/Almost every day

If space permits, it is also worth asking whether the community service was either a course/graduation requirement or done for the purpose of burnishing a college application.

¹² The original wording was “church group.”

If Yes: How much of your volunteer or service activities are

Required by your school or a teacher?

Are to help your college applications?

A lot/Some/A little/ None

Still further context can be provided by a question about whether service learning is required within the respondent's school.

Is participation in a service activity or volunteer work required for students in your school, for example for all students have to do a certain number of hours of community service or volunteer work before graduating?

Yes/No

For students who report participating in service learning, the following questions have proven useful to gauge whether their community service was the impetus for discussion and reflection (Flanagan, Syversten, and Stout 2007).

In your service work:

Did you have an opportunity to think and talk about your experience with other students in class?

Did you apply information learned in class to your service project?

Did you learn about possible causes of and solutions to social problems you were addressing in your service project?

Did you discuss what the government could do to solve the problem?

Yes/No

Knowledge

There is a voluminous literature on the measurement of civic knowledge, and so gauging the breadth and depth of what adolescents know is an embarrassment of riches. Although there are disagreements among scholars regarding what voters ought to know, enough consensus exists that it is feasible to construct a series of questions that gauge different domains of knowledge. Given the potential breadth of questions that could be asked, this paper will not detail specific questions to be

included. Whatever items are chosen, they should include questions about the fundamental rules and institutions of American democracy (e.g. how does Congress override a presidential veto?) but neither should they be limited to such items. Other illuminating questions would ask about the contours of the contemporary political landscape (e.g. which party is more conservative?).

Frankly, past studies have typically taken knowledge items from existing surveys with little thought about their utility as gauges of civic competence (Lupia 2016). To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, a new set of knowledge questions should be designed and pre-tested. A useful template for creating such a knowledge battery is the NAEP civics exam, a high-quality assessment designed with input from a wide range of scholars.

Cognitive Engagement

The first component of cognitive engagement is political discussion, both how frequently they discuss politics and with whom.

The next questions refer to social and political issues, by which we mean the sort of issues you would hear about in the news.

How often do you talk about social and political issues:

In your classes at school?

With your parents and family?

With your friends?

With other people online (social media, blogs, etc.)?

Never/Rarely/Sometimes/Often

These items can then be followed by questions that ask about political disagreement within these discussions.

When you talk about social and political issues with the following people, how often do you disagree—that is, express different views on those issues?

My teachers at school

My parents and family

My friends

Other people online

Never/Rarely/Sometimes/Often

The second dimension of cognitive engagement is media consumption. The frequency of news media consumption can be measured with a single item, such as (Zukin et al. 2006)

Which of the following statements best describes you:

I follow the news closely most of the time

I follow the news only when something important is happening

I rarely follow the news closely

There are many alternatives to this method of measuring news consumption, including items that ask about the respondents' sources of news, the frequency of news consumption should take priority.

In addition to attention to news, it is important to ask about the discerning consumption of political information (Flanagan, Syversten, and Stout 2007).

How much are each of the following like you?

I listen to people talk about politics even when I know that I already disagree with them

When I see or read a news story about an issue, I try to figure out if they're just telling one side of the story

When I hear news about politics, I try to figure out what is really going on

1-5 scale: 1=Not all like me, 3=Some like me, 5=A lot like me¹³

These items refer to talking about politics and news consumption, which could include engagement both online and "in real life." Given its prevalence, any instrument should also include items specific to the use of social media, which can be considered a third dimension of cognitive engagement. As noted above, this is a challenge for any study designed to measure trends over time. It is critical to design the items so that they do not quickly become obsolete as new platforms are adopted (i.e. the MySpace problem). Examples include items used in the Youth and

¹³ This is the scale recommended by Flanagan, Syversten, and Stout and is therefore included here. A survey with these civic indicators should standardize the format of response options, which may require adopting a different scale.

Participatory Politics Survey Project, a national study of young engagement (Cohen et al. 2012; Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen 2014).

How often have you done any of the following things?

Started or joined a political group on a social network site

Forwarded or posted someone else's political commentary or news related to a political campaign, candidate or issue

Contributed your own article, opinion piece, picture, or video about a political campaign, candidate or issue to an online news site

Forwarded or circulated funny videos or cartoons or circulated something artistic that related to a political candidate, campaign or political issues

Written an e-mail or written a blog about a political campaign, candidate, or issue

Commented on a news story or blog about a political campaign, candidate, or issue

Raised or donated money online (via website, Facebook, text, etc.)

Signed an e-mail, Facebook, or other online petition

Expressed support through a social network site such as Facebook, IM, or Twitter (e.g., "liking" or becoming a fan)

Signed up to receive information from candidates or campaigns via e-mail or text

Never/Rarely/Sometimes/Often

With items such as these, it will be possible to measure the connections between online engagement and conventional political activity, such as voting, protesting, and the like. Existing data find, not surprisingly, that online and offline activity are correlated, but there is more to be learned about whether online activity can serve as a "gateway" to other forms of engagement. A model for this type of research is the book *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (Zukin et al. 2006). Published in 2006, this book broke new ground by developing new measures for what were then emerging forms of civic engagement online, developing a typology of different forms of engagement that combined what was new (online activity, political consumerism) with the old (voting, campaigning, protesting). But what was then new has become dated—as examples, at the time of publication there was no iPhone or Facebook.

Big Data

The emergence of large-scale data opens up further possibilities for tracking young people's civic engagement. For example, the automated content analysis of Twitter by organizations such as Crimson Hexagon enables tracking the content and tone of messages sent via Twitter (Hopkins and King 2010). Such technology is a welcome development to track the degree of engagement on particular issues in "real time," rather than relying on retrospective reports on individual-level surveys. For example, such analysis could track the rise of interest in gun control following the Parkland shooting, or in activism more broadly since the presidential election of 2016.

Mining big data is comparable to data on neighborhood characteristics described above. Just as neighborhood-level data can be merged with individual-level surveys, trends in online communication could also be usefully combined with more granular, individual-level data.

Anticipated Involvement

The final set of indicators are not related to the correlates of civic participation but are instead measures of adolescents' anticipated involvement in civic activity upon reaching adulthood. Admittedly, these questions stretch beyond observed behavior, as they ask the respondent to project into the future. Nevertheless, in the domain of civic participation such questions are important, since the intention is to gauge the likelihood of adolescents engaging in civic participation throughout their lives. Questions that ask respondents to project into the future should obviously not be taken as ironclad guarantees of what they will do, but they have been shown to predict behavior in adulthood (D. E. Campbell 2006). At a minimum, they gauge the current mind frame of the respondent, what some scholars have referred to as their civic identity (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997), which in turn can have an effect on their long term behavior. The index below includes measures of both civic and political activity. The political activity ranges from conventional acts such as voting to alternative forms of engagement such as protest.

When you think about your life after high school, how likely is it that you would do each of the following?

Do volunteer work to help needy people

Get involved in issues like health or safety that affect your community

Work with a group to solve a problem in the community where you live

Vote on a regular basis

Wear a campaign button to support a candidate

Volunteer for a political party

Contact or visit someone in government who represents your community

Contact a newspaper, radio, or TV talk show to express your opinion on an issue

Sign an online or written petition

Participate in a boycott against a company

Participate in political activities such as protests, marches, or demonstrations

Not at all likely/Maybe/Extremely likely

Conclusion

The prospect of increased attention to the civic participation of young people is exciting, especially since to date the available data on civics has been so limited. By way of analogy, research into other subject areas such as reading and math has blossomed with the availability of high-fidelity data, which in turn has informed educators and policymakers alike. The same would undoubtedly be true for civics. The systematic collection of these indicators would spur rigorous research into the effectiveness of civic education within America's schools. Especially exciting is the possibility of further understanding the conditions under which schools compensate for adolescents' lack of civic resources in their homes and neighborhoods. Bringing successful practices to scale would counterbalance the deep social inequalities that currently characterize civic participation in America.

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