

**African-American Youth and Civic Engagement:
A Brief Review of the Literature**

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Youth & Civic Engagement Memo

While Alexis de Tocqueville praised Americans for being a people that were “forever forming associations,” the past two decades have been marked by increasing apprehension about the political and civic indifference of the American public.¹ Civic engagement has become a salient issue to those both inside and outside of the academy.² As declarations of civic decline have proliferated, a surge of scholarly work has begun to investigate the validity, meaning, and implications of diminished civic activism. Within this body of work, there is a growing emphasis on the importance of the civic participation of youth. Observations of generational disparities in patterns of civic engagement have raised questions about the viability of democracy in the face of widespread disaffection among youth (Putnam 1996; Soule 2001). In response, social scientists within the field of civic engagement have centered on youth as a subject of inquiry. Those who study the civic patterns of youth vary widely in terms of underlying research questions, approaches to answering those questions, methods employed, and stances in ongoing debates about even the most fundamental matters in the field. In this memo, I elaborate on and analyze the literature relevant to youth and civic engagement. In addition, I critique some of the basic assumptions and oversights inherent in much of the literature, give voice to a few concerns that have yet to be fully addressed, and note possibly fruitful directions for future research. The primary purpose of this memo is to provide an accurate portrait of the state of research on youth civic engagement, while paying special attention to the place (or lack thereof) that African American youth occupy in current research agendas.

¹ de Tocqueville, Alexis. 1969. *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Maier, trans. George Lawrence. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 513–517.

² In this memo, I use the terms civic engagement, civic involvement, civic participation, and civic activism interchangeably and generally do not mean for them to include political indicators such as voting.

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The Thesis of Civic Decline

The foundational step in describing the civic engagement literature is to reflect on the main questions that animate and inform the field. What are the dilemmas or anomalies that stimulate interest in civic engagement? Most notably, recent awareness of civic engagement has been prompted by the widespread perception that civic action in America is dwindling. A large part of the current civic engagement literature revolves around the premise that there has been a drastic demise in American civic participation since the 1960s, what Robert Putnam labels “the strange disappearance of civic America” (Putnam 1996). Putnam has become well known for his research detailing the decay of civic associations across America and contending that the civic and political well being of the country is in danger (Putnam 1995, 1996, 2000).

According to Putnam and others, declining civic life in America is a sign of corroded social capital. Putnam defines social capital as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995:67). Social capital enables people and communities to more effectively pursue shared goals, thus solidifying bonds of social trust and overcoming dilemmas of collective action (Putnam 1996). Civic engagement is a form of social capital. Accordingly, Robert Putnam meticulously notes the manifold ways in which civic engagement is waning by citing decreased organizational membership, weaker religious ties, political apathy, and declining volunteerism (Putnam 1995). Furthermore, he argues that this drop in civic participation correlates to plummeting levels of social trust and neighborliness, and he insists that “trust and engagement are two

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facets of the same underlying factor—social capital” (Putnam 1995:73). Since Putnam believes that social capital directly affects the quality of public life and the functioning of representative government, he recommends urgent efforts to conduct research and create public policy solutions to combat civic decline in America.

Among those who accept Putnam’s argument that civic engagement is on the decline, the resulting tasks include determining the reasons for its deterioration and discovering ways to reinvigorate the apathetic American public. Among those who refute the contention of waning engagement, the challenge is to pinpoint and measure the forms of civic participation that have been either undetected or underestimated (Keeter et al. 2002; Gibson 2001; Schudson 1996; Stengel 1996). Furthermore, not all scholars can be neatly placed in the camps of those who refute or accept the thesis of civic decline. Some researchers are in the midst of collecting exploratory data aimed at determining the extent and/or reality of civic decline (Andolina 2002). Others may not take an explicit stance on the issue of civic decline or do not consider it particularly relevant. Nonetheless, a preponderance of books and articles in the field of civic engagement reference Robert Putnam and/or the thesis of civic decline as a point of departure or contestation or for the purpose of introducing the literature. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge the civic decline thesis as one of the major catalysts of the recent upsurge in attentiveness to civic engagement.

The influence of the thesis of civic decline is particularly pertinent to research regarding youth. A host of scholars point to evidence indicating that older people are more civically oriented than younger people, not simply because of their age (i.e., life cycle effects) but because of independent generational differences in attitudes and

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patterns of civic participation (Putnam 1996; Soule 2001). Data indicate that youth between the ages of 18 and 24 belong to fewer organizations, are less attentive to public affairs or news, and have lower levels of social trust than most of their predecessors (Putnam 1996; Keeter 2002; Soule 2001). Survey research also suggests that younger generations possess more individualistic orientations and rank involvement in public life and collective activities as one of their lowest priorities (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999). Nonetheless, the research to date is not conclusive, and there is a continuing debate over whether youth are less engaged in civic life or are simply engaging in new and different ways (Gibson 2001). Furthermore, while many scholars do believe that youth are less civically engaged than older cohorts, the precise causes of their depressed civic action have yet to be convincingly pinpointed. Among the usual suspects are significant changes in the social, economic, and political environment including increased social isolation, youth violence, economic inequalities, distrust of government, increased residential mobility, the dissolution of marriage and family ties, the growth of the welfare state, and the saturation of culture by the media and other technological forces (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998; Putnam 1996). In the face of so many potential explanations for the purported declining civic involvement of youth, scholars are attempting to measure, describe, and improve the civic lives of those who Scott Keeter et al. have identified as the DotNets, ranging in age from 15 to 25 (Keeter et al. 2002).

Approaches to Studying Civic Engagement

While the debate over whether youth engagement is waning continues to stimulate research, neither the significance nor the reality of declining civic engagement

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can be comprehensively evaluated without understanding the various perspectives from which scholars study civic engagement and the resulting approaches taken. Contributions to the literature regarding civic engagement come from a broad spectrum of sources, and the objectives for studying it vary as widely as those who study it. For the political scientist, civic engagement is an avenue to increased political participation and a more robust democracy (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). For youth foundations and psychologists, civic engagement represents a new approach to youth development (Winter 2003; Flanagan 2001). For sociologists and activists, civic engagement is part of the solution to many of the problems plaguing urban and other communities (Sirianni and Friedland 2001). Although the purposes of studying civic engagement vary, the lines are by no means hard and fast. Psychologists may care about revitalizing democracy and political scientists may view civic engagement as part of an agenda for rebuilding urban communities; stated objectives often overlap and reinforce one another.

The assorted motives for studying civic engagement guide the direction and content of the literature in the field. Scholars study and measure different things based on particular estimations of why civic engagement matters. Some, like Robert Putnam, focus on the connection between civic engagement and social trust (Putnam 2000). Others emphasize the individual-level outcomes of civic engagement in terms of its effect on the behavior and attitudes of youth (Winter 2003). Still others look at the impact of civic involvement on the political behavior of those who engage (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). There are two important reasons for considering why and how scholars study civic engagement. First, there may be assumptions embedded in the rationale for studying civic engagement that must be critically assessed. For example, political

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scientists studying civic engagement often do so in the name of promoting democratic citizenship. By examining patterns of civic participation, they hope to identify and rectify the barriers to youth participation in traditional political activities such as voting and thus strengthen democracy. The implicit belief underlying this motivation is that civic engagement has a discernibly positive impact on political participation. Yet, some scholars question the democratizing effects of civic engagement and argue that civic activities such as joining an association do not necessarily lead to increased political involvement (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2005). The very fact that there is disagreement over the nature of the relationship between civic and political behavior is important. It is imperative, even for those who truly believe in the political benefits of civic engagement, to provide some empirical basis for those beliefs and to confront those who posit otherwise. More generally, knowledge of the underlying ideas that motivate civic engagement research can help to uncover assumptions that may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

The second reason it is essential to recognize the diversity of approaches to studying civic engagement is that such awareness permits discernment of which perspectives are either absent or understated. In the youth civic engagement literature, with a few exceptions, there is a noticeable absence of scholars who closely examine the patterns, particularities, and consequences of civic engagement for youth of color (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002). Current knowledge of minority youth consists mostly of basic comparative data. For example, in his research of civic engagement among minority youth, Mark Lopez discovered that volunteering had increased among African American youth, more African American youth had donated to a church or community organization

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than their white or Hispanic counterparts, and African American youth most strongly supported high school civics courses as a requirement for graduation (Lopez 2002). These basic descriptive data are an important first step, but they provide no substantive explanation of the differences discovered. Hence, while current research often includes descriptive references to racial subgroups, on the whole, social scientists who explore civic engagement are generally not interested in detailed evaluations of youth civic life along racial lines. While this oversight does not discredit the work that has been done on the subject of youth civic engagement, it is a significant marker of the current limits within the field.

Defining Civic Engagement

A central point of dispute among scholars of civic engagement is the proper definition of engagement. What counts as civic engagement for research purposes? What are the accurate indicators of engagement? Choices about which indicators most correctly reflect patterns of civic engagement are informed by theoretical perspectives and ultimately impact the conclusions of research. Underlying the practical issue of measurement are theoretical questions about how to define civic engagement. Since researchers must know precisely what is being measured before measuring it, how one defines civic engagement determines how it is measured.

A primary example of the codependency between theory and method in the field of civic engagement is the dispute among scholars over the difference between civic and political engagement. Some studies include voting and other political activities as a component of civic engagement (Mercado 2005; Oliver 2001). Other research projects

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consider civic engagement as separate from political participation (Campbell 2004; Keeter 2002; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2005). For instance, researchers who focus solely on nonpolitical civic actions such as volunteering, donating to a charity, or joining an association may argue that civic engagement is on the rise among youth. A 1998 national study conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates found that almost 70 percent of young Americans are involved in activities such as volunteering, belonging to an organization, or helping to solve a community problem. Hart thus declares that

Contrary to the portrayal of today's young Americans as self-absorbed and socially inert, the findings of this survey reveal a portrait of a generation not searching to distance itself from the community but instead actively looking for new and distinctive ways of connecting to the people and issues surrounding them.³

In contrast, those who deem that political as well as nonpolitical actions fall under the umbrella of “civic engagement” may be more pessimistic or at least ambivalent about youth civic involvement, since voting and other political indicators among youth have been on the decline (Gibson 2001; Keeter 2002). Different conceptions of civic engagement thus create apparent contradictions in the literature. David Campbell provides a good example of this in his article on community heterogeneity and participation (Campbell 2004). He notes that economists have traditionally claimed that community heterogeneity reduces civic engagement. Yet, he points to the findings of political scientist Eric Oliver indicating that people who live in economically heterogeneous communities have higher levels of engagement (Oliver 2001). How can we reconcile such incongruous conclusions? Campbell's explanation is that Oliver

³ Hart Research Associates, Peter D. 1998. *New Leadership for a New Century: Key Findings from a Study on Youth Leadership and Community Service*. Washington, D.C.: Author, 1.

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concentrates more heavily on political manifestations of engagement while economists focus on civic manifestations of engagement, and both camps label their subject of inquiry “civic engagement” (Campbell 2004). Not all scholars view civic participation as purely civic and political participation as purely political. For example, political scientist Stephen Mercado and his colleagues claim that

civic engagement includes any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity...We do not draw a sharp distinction between ‘civic’ and ‘political’ engagement because we recognize that politics and civil society are interdependent: a vibrant politics depends on a vibrant civil society. Political voice can, for example, mean participation in formal government institutions, but it may also involve becoming part of a group or organization, protesting or boycotting, or even simply talking to a neighbor across the backyard fence [emphasis theirs].⁴

On the other hand, David Campbell insists that there is a difference between civic and political participation and that “the fundamental distinction between them is that while both are collective action, political activity is directed at effecting or preventing change in public policy, while civic activity does not have a policy focus.”⁵

The decision to differentiate between civic and political engagement has led some scholars to denounce the trend of rising volunteerism and decreasing participation in the larger political sphere and others to embrace it. Michael Delli Carpini argues that the incongruence between civic and political behavior is problematic:

Civic engagement has become *defined* as the one-on-one experience of working in a soup kitchen, clearing trash from a local river, or tutoring a child once a week. What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual,

⁴ Mercado, Stephen. 2005. *Democracy at Risk*. Brookings Institute.

⁵ Campbell, David E. 2004. “What You Do Depends on Where You Are: Community Heterogeneity and Participation.” Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association, April 15.

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isolated problems these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy.⁶

For Delli Carpini and other political scientists, individual acts of volunteerism, even if duplicated across the collective, cannot address larger political and social issues that must be managed via politics (Delli Carpini 2000; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2005). Thus, they would find it dangerous that

Young people have found ways to break the glass ceiling the Baby Boomers had on the economy by working in and launching dot-coms and other Internet start-ups and to ‘make change’ by establishing new and innovative nonprofits. But they haven’t found a way to make their voices heard in a very daunting political system that they see as beholden to special interests, unethical, and unable to achieve real outcomes.⁷

Robert Weissberg, on the other hand, perceives the exact opposite problem. In his book *The Limits of Civic Activism*, Weissberg criticizes scholars of civic engagement for their unbridled acceptance of the virtues of civic action and contends that individual behavior is often more beneficial and efficient than civic action. He writes that “virtually every goal reachable via civic activism is achievable outside the civic arena, and often more efficiently... ‘Political apathy’ scarcely signifies passivity, only a choice of weapons.”⁸ As an alternative to civic engagement, Weissberg recommends “politics by other means,” primarily private and government-free measures including volunteering, boycotting, donating to charity, and community organizing. Weissberg censures scholars for encouraging reliance on big government by thoughtlessly promoting civic activism.

⁶ Delli Carpini, M. 2000. “The Disengaged Generation: Evidence and Potential Solutions.” Keynote address at the President’s Leadership Colloquium, University of Pennsylvania, June 26, 8.

⁷ Gibson, Cynthia. 2001. “From Inspiration to Participation: A Review of Perspectives on Youth Civic Engagement.” The Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service, 4.

⁸ Weissberg, Robert. 2005. *The Limits of Civic Activism: Cautionary Tales on the Use of Politics*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 12.

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However, in denouncing the civic engagement/participation literature, Weissberg tacitly equates civic activism with political demands for government intervention. He assumes that civic activism means badgering the government for help via political mechanisms and ignores the fact that what many scholars define as civic engagement is precisely what he labels “private politics.” Weissberg confronts civic engagement scholars and criticizes them for shoddy, vague definitions of political participation, but he himself does not distinguish between political participation and civic engagement, nor does he make an argument for why they should be theoretically equivalent. Weissberg, however, is not a unique example. The civic engagement literature is filled with confusion stemming from scholars using the same terms to describe different concepts.

Theoretically fuzzy explanations of civic and political participation combined with a lack of sound grounding for decisions about what counts as civic engagement are an impediment to research. Scholars will likely never agree on how to demarcate the boundaries between the civic and political realms. They should not, however, assume that there is some unspoken understanding of those boundaries. Instead, it is crucial that social scientists take the difficult but meticulous step of specifying and justifying their particular stance on the definitional issues in the field. It is also necessary for researchers to be aware of and admit the implications of chosen measurement techniques for accurately assessing varying groups. Furthermore, consistency in terminology is challenging yet particularly helpful. The sheer volume of descriptive terms for civic engagement can be problematic. Terms such as civic activism, civic engagement, civic participation, political participation, political action, etc., often mean distinctly different

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things for each research project. Unless scholars explain what they mean, misunderstandings will continue to abound.

Methodology

In addition to theoretical debates over definition, there are other important matters regarding the methods of measuring civic engagement, specifically concerning the use of qualitative and/or quantitative research methods. Survey research is the most common means by which civic engagement is quantitatively assessed, while qualitative researchers rely on focus groups (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Andolina et al. 2002). At times focus groups are used to gather preliminary qualitative information that can dictate the direction and content of quantitative measures such as surveys (Andolina 2002). Yet, as a whole, survey research methods dominate the literature on civic engagement (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). This research has been valuable in many ways but problematic in others.

Surveys are useful insofar as they can yield data that are representative enough to provide generalizable information about the American public and its particular subsets. However, there are several limitations to the current data available and to the use of survey data in general. First, survey data on young Americans is scarce because of their small numbers in nationally representative samples (Soule 2001). There have been very few rigorously conducted large *n* national studies of youth and civic participation. Most books and articles about civic engagement use a hodgepodge of statistics from a variety of sources, each of which supplies different kinds of data. Some sources provide voting data, others provide data about attitudes and opinions of youth toward civic issues, others

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gauge the civic knowledge of youth, and still others indicate volunteer rates.

Furthermore, with notions of what counts as civic engagement constantly evolving, there is an increasing need for new research designs that capture a wide range of pertinent information about the civic activity among youth and include newer categories such as consumer activism. With the arguable exception of the recent work of Scott Keeter, few national surveys explore both the traditional and newer aspects of youth civic engagement. This is problematic because the hodgepodge method of combining pieces of data from different sources makes it difficult to successfully compare populations and/or behaviors.

The second dilemma of survey research is that it is often not buttressed by qualitative work. Robert Weissberg criticizes survey data regarding civic engagement and political participation, writing,

[On survey questionnaires] The primary question is not, ‘What have you done politically?’ That invites a plethora of jumbled responses, many of which undoubtedly are vague or of uncertain relevance...the query is more restricted, ‘Have you (in some time period) done X? Or Y? Or Z?’...It is the investigator who thusly defines ‘participation’ by select exemplar, and those pursuing unmentioned strategies are misclassified as ‘apathetic.’⁹

Although Weissberg tends toward excessive criticism, his remarks are not invalid. Civic engagement is dynamic and evolving. Without sound qualitative research complementing quantitative projects, social scientists run the risk of misunderstanding the attitudes and behavior of young people. Especially in light of the age gap between researchers and their subjects, it is crucial that investigators understand and account for differences in language, concepts, emphasis, and perceptions of youth. For example, through focus

⁹ Weissberg, Robert. 2005. *The Limits of Civic Activism: Cautionary Tales on the Use of Politics*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 32.

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group research, Andolina et al. surprisingly discovered that the concept of “citizenship” was largely irrelevant to many of the young people to whom they spoke (Andolina 2002). These researchers had expected sharp reactions to the term “citizen” and when they did not encounter this response, they were able to consider revising their survey questions accordingly. This is just one example of the important relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods, particularly in research on youth and civic engagement. While there are strengths and weaknesses inherent in either approach, qualitative research cannot be ignored in lieu of large n surveys because, as Molly Andolina and her colleagues emphasize,

If we are interested in moving beyond *what* a particular group thinks to understanding *why* and *how* members of this group approach a problem, we need to employ a methodology that allows for the exploration of these issues. Qualitative approaches provide for this deeper investigation. In a quantitative study (such as a telephone interview), the scope of the topic under investigation is set by the researcher prior to the interview. A qualitative methodology, in contrast, gives greater control to the respondent, which allows the researcher to listen for perspectives on issues and interpretations of questions that may not have been anticipated by earlier preparations.¹⁰

The third problematic feature of current survey research is that it underrepresents minority subsets of the population, specifically African American youth but also rural, poor, and imprisoned/institutionalized youth. Attention to the effect of group identification on the individual’s participation in and perception of civic activities is largely missing from discussions of civic engagement (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002). Most surveys are not designed with African American youth in mind. Statistical analysis of survey data may include controls for race or break down data by race, but most surveys are not constructed with the particular history and experiences of minority youth at their

¹⁰ Andolina, Molly, et al. 2002. Searching for the Meaning of Youth Civic Engagement: Notes from the Field. *Applied Developmental Science* 6(4):190.

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forefront. Since minority youth may express different attitudes and ideas toward civic engagement and may engage in special ways because of their group history, traditional measures of civic engagement are likely to misrepresent them (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002). For example, African American youth may consider hip-hop a vehicle for civic engagement. Yet, if researchers do not investigate the new and different ways that this cultural form can be used as a means of civic expression, they may mistakenly neglect a large part of the civic life of African American youth. One notable exception is the current survey research being conducted by Lonnie Sherrod and his colleagues at Fordham University (Sherrod 2003). Sherrod specifically focuses on the political and civic attitudes and experiences of poor and minority youth in the New York metropolitan area (Sherrod 2003:289). The efforts of scholars such as Sánchez and Sherrod with regards to racial minorities as well as Hart and Atkins with regards to urban youth are crucial but not enough. As a whole, since survey work is often about assessing general trends, it is easy to undersample or simply ignore minorities. In addition to African American youth, civic engagement scholars often fail to notice rural youth (Lay 2003) and youth that are excluded from surveys because of imprisonment or institutionalization.

Despite the abovementioned faults of survey work in the field of youth civic engagement, it is important to note that my emphasis here is on the complementary relationship between quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Small *n* qualitative research is often vulnerable to bias because of the potential idiosyncrasies of a few extreme participants and the subjectivity of interpreting textual data. Large sample surveys are plagued by the problems recounted above. Hence, multimethodological

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research is likely the most effective route to a broad, thorough, and substantive examination of the civic lives of young people.

Factors Influencing Engagement

The goal of many scholars in the field of youth civic engagement is to identify the main influences on youth civic engagement. Education, political institutions, parental example, individual psychological factors, race, class, religion, and geographic location are just a few of the factors commonly attributed as causes of differential civic participation. Examined individually, each of these factors has some relation to levels of youth civic engagement (Hart and Atkins 2002; Mercado 2005; Sánchez-Jankowski 2002; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Yet, because the “debate about the civic character of American youth has passed beyond broad-brush depictions,” discoveries of correlations are no longer sufficient (Hart and Atkins 2002:227). Instead, social scientists are faced not only with the task of discerning the specific processes by which demographic and other factors come to shape the civic lives of youth, but also with the challenge of assessing “the relative importance of these influences on the development of civic competence” (Hart and Atkins 2002:229). Below, I briefly overview some of the work that has contributed to our understanding of the causes of youth civic behavior. I focus on education/service learning, political institutions/public policy, family, geographical location, and race. These areas do not represent all the variables that impact youth civic participation. The goal is to begin to paint a picture of the array of factors that could potentially engender civic activism. Ultimately, however, none of these approaches

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provides a holistic explanation, because multiple forces including and beyond what is included in this memo interact in shaping youth civic engagement.

Education and Service Learning

Longitudinal research indicates that education level is a primary variable determining civic participation (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Although the number of high school and college graduates has increased during the past two decades, researchers have found evidence of declining levels of political knowledge among American youth (Delli Carpini 1996). In response to such findings, many social scientists have examined the ways that schools in the United States can effectively encourage youth civic engagement. Civic education initiatives and service learning projects are two of the resulting policy manifestations (Gibson 2001). The evidence that increased civic education or knowledge of civics leads to higher levels of civic or political engagement is ambivalent at best (Gibson 2001). Taking civic courses and learning about politics has a positive impact but is not enough to spark engagement among youth (Keeter 2002). Instead, educational techniques that require students to develop specific civic skills such as letter writing or debating political issues tend to be more effective catalysts of civic involvement (Andolina 2003; Keeter 2002). There is a growing distinction between civic *knowledge* and civic *competence*, namely, the difference between learning facts about democratic citizenship and being inspired toward/equipped for democratic citizenship (Gibson 2001). The service-learning approach attempts to bridge this gap by combining classroom instruction with community service.

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Service-learning centers on the experiential element of civic education by inducing young people to engage in community activities that reinforce what they learn in the classroom (Gibson 2001). Subsequent to national initiatives such as the National and Community Service Act of 1990, the service-learning concept has developed and been more widely implemented, and several states now have educational policies requiring it (Gibson 2001). What is largely absent from the educational literature in regards to youth civic engagement is empirical data assessing the long-term effects of the service-learning approach (Gibson 2001). In addition, there is a lack of research exploring the potentially differential impact of service-learning initiatives in poor and minority schools and communities. Existing research indicates that levels of civic competence are lower among urban youth (Hart and Atkins 2002). Yet, national surveys suggest that black adolescents show greater interest than white adolescents in issues related to social justice and community leadership (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1996). It may be the case that service-learning initiatives are more effective among black adolescents whose group history and life experiences have engendered sensitivity to community needs or that service-learning approaches face unique obstacles in minority communities and must take a novel form in order to achieve successful outcomes (Teter 2003). It is imperative that researchers map the specific impact of service-learning on civic engagement along various demographic lines. Without social scientific work exploring this issue, well-intentioned state and national initiatives may fail to adapt to the needs of people who will benefit most from increased civic engagement.

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Scholars must also continue to explore the ways in which schools may discourage civic engagement. Most of the civic engagement literature focuses on schools as a potential avenue for promoting civic engagement via civic coursework, service-learning, or other initiatives. However, there is a relative paucity of work specifically charting the ways that bad or ineffective schooling can act as a barrier to civic participation. The recent work of Michelle Fine and her colleagues at the City University of New York suggest that badly run schools can jeopardize the “likelihood of democratic engagement” by reproducing and exacerbating existing social inequities that disadvantage poor and minority youth (Fine 2004). This kind of research is significant because it extends the discussion of civic engagement and education beyond matters of curriculum and school-mandated community service to more fundamental considerations of both educational disparities and the overall quality of education as potential impediments to the civic lives of youth.

Political Institutions/Public Policy

Institutionalist and other political scientists look at the ways that political institutions have impacted American civic life. In the book *Democracy at Risk*, Stephen Mercado and his colleagues argue that “the levels and distribution of civic activity are themselves political artifacts. Whether consciously intended or not, the design of our current political institutions and practices turns citizens off.”¹¹ Mercado thus emphasizes the ways in which political institutions/practices impact the proclivity of citizens to engage. Delli Carpini reinforces this idea by suggesting that if young people are viewed as

¹¹Mercado, Stephen. 2005. *Democracy At Risk*. Brookings Institute.

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disengaged, it is “not because they are satisfied with the current state of affairs or because they do not care about their fellow citizens, [but rather] because they are alienated from the institutions and processes of civic life and lack the motivation, opportunity and ability to overcome this alienation.”¹² There is little detailed research (with the exception of the recent publication by Stephen Mercado) on the specific ways that institutions and policy impact civic activism. This is especially central in the case of African American youth who often have more frequent contact with state institutions and less trust in government than their white counterparts (Lopez 2002). While civic engagement scholars are attentive to the relationship between government trust and youth engagement, they are less mindful of the connection between civic engagement and specific elements of state action (e.g., the criminal justice system, welfare, etc.) and have not yet examined the precise ways in which state practices inhibit or discourage civic participation, particularly among minority youth.

Family

As previously noted, the concept of social capital plays a central role in civic engagement literature insofar as the lack of social capital is popularly posited as the main reason for declining civic activity. The function of family as a purveyor of social trust and connectedness is a central feature of the social capital literature. According to Robert Putnam, “the most fundamental form of social capital is the family and massive evidence of the loosening of bonds within the family...is well known” (Putnam 1995). In the midst

¹² Delli Carpini, M. 2000. “The Disengaged Generation: Evidence and Potential Solutions.” Keynote address at the President’s Leadership Colloquium, University of Pennsylvania, June 26, 7.

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of speculation about the impact of women entering the labor force in large numbers, higher rates of divorce, and more single-parent families, scholars of civic engagement have begun analyzing the relationship between family and the civic patterns of youth. To date, this research is informative yet often lacks sufficient scope.

Several studies indicate that parents, guardians, and siblings act as critical exemplars of appropriate civic behavior (Andolina 2003). For example, survey research by Molly Andolina, Scott Keeter, and their colleagues showed that young people who were raised in homes where someone volunteered were more likely to join groups, volunteer, wear buttons, or display bumper stickers than those who did not grow up in such homes (Andolina 2003; Keeter 2002). Furthermore, Keeter and Andolina found that youth with engaged role models are also more attentive to news of politics and government and more likely to participate in boycotts or buycotts. Other research has corroborated these findings, showing that parental involvement in political and social causes is associated with children's greater participation (Youniss et al. 2002). The influence of family role models is significant even when demographic and other factors are controlled for (Andolina 2003).

Kent Jennings and Laura Stoker similarly found that parents play a role in determining the extent to which their children participate in voluntary associations. However, Jennings and Stoker noted that "the magnitude of these family linkages is modest at best" and questioned those who assert family as a primary influence on social trust and civic engagement (Jennings and Stoker 2002). Hence, while researchers agree that the behavior of parents and family at least partially explains civic patterns of youth, there is no consensus regarding the priority of familial influence relative to other factors.

In addition, scholars have only begun to probe the range of family dynamics that can potentially affect the civic lives of youth. For example, many studies, like those

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mentioned in this section thus far, compare the civic behavior of parents to that of their children in order to discern relevant correlations. However, there are many familial features, aside from parental civic involvement, that can influence the civic choices of youth. For example, the affective climate of family interactions, parents' examples of prosocial behaviors, parents' ability to communicate their values and ideals clearly, the specific attitudes and values that are openly discussed in the home, how parental messages are understood, and adolescents' receptivity to parental messages can all contribute to the civic patterns of youth (Smetana and Metzger 2005). However, there is a paucity of research that has "examined these different routes to civic involvement or identified the [specific] processes through which parental influence is effective" (Smetana and Metzger 2005). Research on the function of family in promoting youth civic engagement must include assessment of a wider variety of family relations before scholars can reach any consensus.

Geographic Context

Regional, municipal, and neighborhood/community residence are all elements of geographic context that can affect the civic engagement of youth. Hart and Atkins' study of civic competence in urban youth revealed a broad deficiency in skills necessary to participate in civic life (2002). According to Hart and Atkins, this deficiency is the result of disadvantages that urban youth have with respect to examples of adult participation, schooling, and affiliation with voluntary organizations (Hart and Atkins 2002:232). Other scholars find patterns similar to those discovered by Hart and Atkins, but through in-depth interviews with various youth also discern "a more complex picture" (Kirshner et

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al. 2003). According to Ben Kirshner and his colleagues, “terms such as ‘cynical’ or ‘alienated’ that are used to categorize broad demographic groups misrepresent the complexity of youth’s attitudes” (2003). Instead, Kirshner et al. insist that urban youth growing up in neighborhoods and schools with insufficient resources actively partake in civic life via “critical analysis of structural forces and power,” thus participating in a complex process of “critical” civic engagement, in which youth’s civic activism is motivated by their personal experiences of social problems (Kirshner et al. 2003).

In addition to those scholars who focus on the unique civic patterns of urban youth are those who study civic engagement among rural youth (Lay 2003). The little available research on the participation of rural youth indicates that growing up in poor rural communities does not lead to nonparticipation and low political knowledge to the same extent as being raised in poor urban communities (Lay 2003). Nonetheless, the overall effect of rural residence, outside of economic context, is largely unstudied.

In addition to the relevance of rural versus urban environments, some civic engagement scholars have turned their attention to local community relations as a pathway to youth civic engagement (Zeldin and Camino 2002). State and local policy makers have begun to follow suit by promoting the engagement of youth in community governance (Zeldin et al. 2003). Research indicates that youth involvement in community decision-making has a positive political and social impact on the communities in question, and scholars are thus centering on community as a critical component of youth civic life (Zeldin et al. 2003).

Youth are inevitably situated within specific regions and communities. Hence, geographic location has an effect on the opportunity structures within which they make

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decisions about whether and how to engage in civic life. Research thus far has only begun to draw out the processes by which the various levels of geographic residence work both together and separately to promote or hinder youth civic engagement. Among the many questions left to consider is the degree to which trends apparent on the regional (urban versus suburban versus rural) level remain constant between neighborhoods within given regions. At the heart of this question is the challenge for civic engagement scholars to separate the effects of each aspect of geographic context in order to determine which (if any) has a more potent effect on civic engagement (e.g., neighborhood as primary determinant versus region).

Race

The concept of race has endured as a central feature of the social and political fabric of American life. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that histories of racial exclusion, inclusion, and privilege impact patterns of civic engagement among today's youth. Sociologist Martín Sánchez-Jankowski argues that there are several civic subcultures within the United States, each of which maps onto specific historical experiences that stem from membership in a particular racial or ethnic group (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002).

For groups such as American Indians, African Americans, and Mexican Americans, race prevails as an organizing principle and histories of systematic exclusion “influence the content, amount, and intensity of their civic engagement” (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002). For Sánchez-Jankowski and those who study the racial dimensions of civic engagement, race is just a piece of the puzzle of civic life, not the sole explanatory variable. Yet, race is an aspect of civic engagement that is consistently overlooked. Even

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when it is thrown into analyses as a variable of interest, there is an absence of deeper thought in regards to specific group histories and how they might engender certain forms of civic participation and inhibit others.

While the work of Sánchez-Jankowski is a welcome departure from the norm in the field of civic engagement, many questions have yet to be asked or answered regarding the civic patterns of minority youth. Sánchez-Jankowski plausibly establishes the importance of group history as a “filtering device” mitigating the influence of both formal and informal institutions in socializing young people toward civic engagement (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002:243). Yet, social scientists must still elaborate on the specific dynamics of civic life among African American and other marginalized youth. While currently we have basic statistics about the civic engagement of minority youth versus whites on some main measures, we are relatively clueless about the attitudes and experiences that account for these data (Lopez 2002). The ongoing work of Lonnie Sherrod and his colleagues is an important step in acquiring this kind of information. Going forward, civic engagement literature can be expanded via research projects aimed at determining how and why youth of color may engage in nontraditional or different ways than their white counterparts. Finally, separating out the effect of race from that of other factors such as socioeconomic background and geographic residence remains an important goal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to point to one final and significant criticism of the field as a whole. Very few scholars within the field *comprehensively* consider the influences and implications relevant to youth civic engagement. Scholars varyingly use

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civic engagement as a proxy for political participation, youth development, the general health and wellness of civil society, and more. While this variability adds to the richness of the literature, it also engenders conflicting prognoses of how to cure America's civic ills. As Cynthia Gibson indicates,

Despite a shared interest in creating opportunities for youth to become active citizens, members of these various disciplines tend to talk past each other because of their differing assessments of what should be done, how, and by whom. Political scientists focus on the political; educators focus on what happens in or near the classroom; service-learning advocates focus on service and volunteering; youth development specialists focus on the developmental experience of the young person. In short, there is common interest, but no common ground.¹³

There is little agreement across or even within disciplines on the means to engage and help youth. As a result, a systematic understanding of the problems and possibilities of youth civic engagement is exceedingly difficult. Scholars each tackle individual aspects of youth civic engagement (i.e., race, class, psychological dimensions, etc.), but little work is done to integrate these components to gain a more wide-ranging understanding of youth civic engagement. While each component of civic engagement is consequential, it is impossible to determine their relative importance or to develop prognoses for potential problems without a broad understanding incorporating all of these elements. This memo has emphasized race as an important aspect of research on youth civic engagement. On the whole, however, race is part of an array of features of the civic terrain and cannot be properly understood in isolation. The most pressing challenge facing civic engagement scholars is to draw on inter- and intradisciplinary discourses in order to produce work

¹³ Gibson, Cynthia. 2001. "From Inspiration to Participation: A Review of Perspectives on Youth Civic Engagement." *The Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service*, 1.

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that provides wide-reaching yet detailed explanations of the dynamic of civic engagement among the various youth populations in the United States.

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