Three Core Measures of Community-Based Civic Engagement: Evidence from the Youth Civic Engagement Indicators Project

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Abstract:

Using data derived from an extensive study of civic and political engagement in the U.S. with a special emphasis on youth, this paper documents 15-19 year-olds' involvement in civic life. We address the importance of youth civic engagement for later involvement in public life and document the extent to which youth ages 15-19 are involved in activities broadly construed as community centered. Specific attention will be paid to engagement in community problem solving, volunteering, and group or organizational membership. We describe the process used to select the indicators used to measure these behaviors, and address the methodological problems associated with proper measurement. Finally, we provide evidence regarding the reliability and validity of our indicators.

Introduction

Adolescents and young adults are less interested and engaged in politics and public life than their elders (Associated Press 2000; Meinert 2000). Much of the focus of their lives is on the development of social relations and on school – only a small part of which is devoted to preparing citizens for the responsibilities that lie ahead. Youth lack an attachment to the larger world which is fundamental to fostering interest and engagement. Add to that a basic cynicism toward politics and politicians (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999), and it is not surprising that many youth are tuned out and disengaged from what's going on around them.

But youth are not equally disengaged from all forms of participation in public affairs. Youth involvement in community and charitable work is greater than it is with election campaigns and other traditional forms of political participation. Community based civic involvement is a natural and age-appropriate means of activity for many youth, and schools in the United States are increasingly encouraging and facilitating such activity. Taking a closer look at these activities among youth calls into question the legitimacy of such labels as "tuned out" and "disengaged."

This paper examines three measures of community based civic engagement: informal group activity to solve community problems, volunteering, and group membership. Because these concepts are somewhat broad and amorphous, their reliable measurement presents challenges to survey research.

Research on youth and community involvement

Those who have examined the engagement patterns of youth today confirm the obvious: they are not engaged in electoral politics and demonstrate relatively little interest in political affairs. Surveys conducted prior to the 2000 election found that only 55 percent of 18-24 year olds said they were registered to vote; just 46 percent said they were "absolutely" certain they would vote in the upcoming election (Kaiser Family Foundation 2000). These fall short of the averages for all adults, 75 percent of whom claim to be registered and more than three-quarters of registered voters (84 percent) who said they were absolutely certain to vote in the fall (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2000).

Youth are also not inclined to see voting as a civic duty (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999), and eschew traditional political activities and orientations. They do not view politics as relevant to their daily lives, consider political leaders to be "out of touch" and government to be "too slow" (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999; Freyman and McGoldrick 2000). Almost half (46 percent) of 15-24 year olds never or almost never talk about politics and government or current events with their parents (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999).

Despite the aversion to politics prevalent among youth, the same cannot be said for community-centered involvement. High rates of volunteering suggest that youth believe they can make more of a difference in the community than in the voting booth. In fact, thirty-nine percent

of 18-24 year-olds say that they put their faith in community involvement over turning out on election day (Kaiser Family Foundation 2000).

Part of the reason why youth are more active in civic than political work involves the role of schools. It is becoming increasingly common for high schools and colleges to facilitate community involvement among their students. Our data found that 75 percent of high school students say that their school arranges or offers service activities or volunteer work for students; 65 percent of college students report the same thing. Youth are taking advantage of these opportunities to get involved. Close to half (45 percent) of those who attend high schools where community work is arranged report volunteering in the recent past, and 38 percent of college students at service oriented universities are motivated to volunteer. These numbers attest to the institutional connection between youth and civic behavior.

While the apparent disconnect among youth between civic and political behavior is troubling, it should not overshadow the importance of high incidences of civic behavior and what this may mean for future engagement. As the larger project from which this research is drawn has shown, *civic* activity is not necessarily *nonpolitical* activity. Many people who engage in volunteering and community problem solving also attempt to influence governmental policy as a part of their work in this arena. Although some of them have rejected electoral politics as the best way to get problems solved, even these individuals have not necessarily eschewed the use of governmental power and resources. Consequently, youth who are active in their community may become more likely to understand the complexity of public issues and to recognize political solutions to problems. Their community work has the potential to put them in contact with elected officials and to learn the best means for communicating with them. It is not unreasonable to expect that civic behavior in early adulthood will lead to political engagement in later years.

Developmental perspectives on youth civic engagement
It is not enough for youth to enter adulthood with a well-established habit of attentiveness and engagement. Youth also need to learn why engagement is important, rather than engaging in rote, unquestioned behavior, which may do a disservice to the complexity of political and social issues faced in adulthood. The motivations for being an engaged citizen need to go beyond mere identification with democratic rights such as voting and free speech. Those who do something "just because it's what I'm supposed to do" run the risk of becoming what Keniston (1968) describes as adults who are "simple patriots, unquestioning conformists, or blind loyalists to the status quo"(272).

Furthermore, youth need to be taught that citizenship goes beyond engagement for purely self-interested purposes. As Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002) point out, "one can be quite selfish and oriented entirely to one's own material or occupational success and still be involved with and committed to the nation state, in regard to voting, campaigning, following news, and so on" (173). The importance of psychological traits such as altruism and concern for others are critical to well-rounded youth political and civic development. Thus, there is more to the story regarding why it is important for youth to be active and attentive to the larger world around them. What they are thinking is of equal importance as what they are doing.

Into the breach steps research regarding the psychological benefits of youth civic engagement. Researchers are consistent in their belief that the years between 14 and 25 "are a period of great flexibility and openness" (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998). Focusing on the early work of Mannheim (1952), who stressed that early adulthood carries with it freedom from the constraints of social roles and the tendency to question dominant ideals of the day, researchers have attempted to show that the early years of one's life can lay the foundation for a psychologically well-rounded approach to later engagement.

For example, political and civic engagement is sustained, in part, through feelings of internal efficacy.[1] Participation is likely to lag if individuals do things simply because it is what they were taught to do, rather than being motivated by a deep belief in the usefulness of their efforts. Getting youth involved in politics and civic life through volunteer efforts, community improvement programs, and a host of other opportunities for engagement can promote confidence building which, in turn, can increase the chances that they will see their efforts as useful. Indeed, as Kahne and Westheimer (2002) have shown recently, levels of commitment to future participation increase in response to feelings of efficacy achieved through community based programs. Demonstrating to youth, rather than merely telling them they can make a difference, solidifies in their mind that later engagement will also be a useful endeavor.

Measuring civic engagement among youth

Data for this paper were collected during a two-year project funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The research had two principal goals: 1) to develop a reliable but concise set of indicators of civic and political engagement, with a special focus on youth ages 15-25; and 2) to assess the civic and political health of the nation. We began the project with exploratory work using a pair of expert panels and a series of focus groups with citizens in various age groups during 2001. In the fall of 2001, we conducted several small surveys to test specific items. In winter 2002, we conducted a large national survey among youth aged 15-25 using Knowledge Networks' panel of web-enabled households. In spring 2002, we conducted a large national telephone survey, which provides most of the data reported here. Two focus groups to help us provide validation for our measures were held during the summer of 2002, and another national telephone survey in fall 2002 provides additional evidence about the reliability of the indicators.

Data used in this paper come primarily from the spring 2002 national telephone survey, conducted April 4-May 20. The total sample size was 3,246. Owing to our focus on youth, people aged 15-25 were oversampled (N=1,001). For this paper, we focus primarily on the 461 respondents who were aged 15-19.[2]

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[1] Efficacy is a multidimensional phenomenon. *External efficacy* is broadly understood to mean an individual's assessment of governmental responsiveness to citizen demands. *Internal efficacy* is the extent to which an individual believes she alone can effect change through her efforts.

[2] The sample was weighted to reflect national population parameters on sex, age, race, education, and ethnicity.

Key concepts for measurement

    Civic activity can be viewed as one element of a broader concept of *civic and political engagement,* itself a variant of a core topic in political science, *political participation*. Political participation is typically defined as actions undertaken by citizens to influence government and public policy. Civic and political engagement is a broader notion than political participation in at least two important respects. First, it also includes *cognitive engagement* in public affairs – paying attention to government and public affairs, following the news in newspapers, on television, radio, or the Internet, talking about politics with friends and family, and expressing interest in the subject. Second, it broadens the object of the activity and the arena in which it occurs beyond the government to non-governmental organizations.

    A key debate about the study of *civic engagement*, which includes most of the community-centered activity we focus on in this paper, is the extent to which it is political in nature. This debate is important because of disagreement about the consequences of civic activity. One perspective fears that civic activities such as volunteering serve as substitutes for political activity, displacing the essential work citizens need to do to keep a democracy healthy. This debate is seen even among proponents of programs explicitly designed to involve youth, such as service learning. More broadly, the controversy is now evolving into a debate between liberals and conservatives over the degree to which the nonprofit sector can and should take over social welfare activities that the government has performed since the creation of the modern welfare state in the 1930s and 1940s.

    Apart from the debate over the proper scope of government, there is a more neutral question regarding the extent to which civic activity has value as an element of the political system. Political scientists in the U.S. have long observed that groups and associations not only provide important services to their communities but also function as important players in the political game (Bentley 1908; Truman 1951). They serve as a means of mobilizing citizens to influence government and a place for the training of citizens in the tools of collective action that can be turned to more explicitly political activity. Especially for youth, who find certain avenues of the political system closed off due to age restrictions and cultural norms, civic involvement in the community may be the best and most appropriate means for developing good skills for citizenship. More generally, Verba and his colleagues (1995) have shown that civic institutions are a critical locale for skill building.

    Beyond these theoretical and normative questions, there is the empirical question of the degree to which active citizens engage in both political and civic activities (or, conversely, inactive citizens do neither). That is, how correlated are these two dimensions of activity? As we show in detail below, the survey provides evidence of the multi-dimensionality of engagement. Items related to electoral politics – voting, donating money to campaigns, trying to persuade others – correlate with one another better than they correlate with other kinds of activities. Similarly, civic activities, defined as organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others, also cluster together. Other activities that entail the use of what we call "political voice" – things people do to give expression to their political and social viewpoints – correlate with both the electoral and the civic activities, but also tend to cluster with one another.

And although these dimensions are both theoretically and empirically distinct, the picture is not an entirely clear one, for several reasons.

Challenges to good measurement

One difficulty faced by those who develop measures of political and civic engagement is that there is a limited number of key activities in which citizens engage, and these tend to be discrete events (voting is, for many, the most important activity and perhaps the best example of this problem). Consequently, unlike orientations such as attachment to siblings or parents, life satisfaction, or knowledge about a specific domain, it is difficult to create a highly reliable measure using a battery of indicators. One can ask many questions about attitudes toward voting, but there is a limit on how many different ways we can ask about voting in a specific election, or even the regularity of voting in general.

A second problem is that for most citizens, explicitly political activity is episodic – either because the opportunities are episodic, as with the case of elections, or because politics in general has a low salience and people tend to be rousted to action by events or by friends or organizations who recruit them for a particular purpose, such as signing a petition. One result is that many of the activities that fall within the domain of political activity have low incidences. Given low incidences, and a phenomenon that is driven at least in part by factors external to the citizen (the rise and fall of certain issues, the schedule of elections), even a relatively large battery of items reflecting a range of activities will not produce an internally consistent scale.

Since highly reliable scales are not likely to be achieved, the challenge in developing good measures of civic and political engagement is somewhat different from that faced in other domains of behavior and attitude. *Content validity* is especially important. Ensuring that the full range of relevant behaviors is covered is particularly challenging when the focus is on youth, who may be finding or inventing new means of engagement. Our project devoted several months of intensive study to this issue, including a pair of expert panels and a series of focus groups conducted in four locations around the country. A principal goal of this exploratory research was to map the full range of political and civic activity currently going on among young people.

One other challenge faced by all researchers, but especially relevant to our work, is the tradeoff between greater coverage and perhaps reliability from the use of multiple measures, and the financial costs of a long survey and the respondent burden that accompanies it. Our mission was to develop an index that would cover the most important forms of civic and political engagement, but that was short enough for use as a needs assessment or evaluation tool by nonprofit groups, community-based researchers, and academics working with very limited budgets. This need for both broad coverage and concision mitigated against the development of lengthy batteries of indicators.

Empirical evidence of the dimensions

The exploratory research and subsequent item testing conducted during 2001 yielded a core set of 19 dichotomous indicators, exclusive of cognitive engagement measures. (Question wording for all items can be found in Appendix A.) The spring 2002 telephone survey included these 19 items, along with extensive batteries of items measuring cognitive engagement, political attitudes and orientations, demographic characteristics, and for the youngest respondents, experiences in school.

When these are subjected to an exploratory principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation (with the entire sample), six factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0 are extracted, though three of these barely exceed the criterion level for an independent factor. When the solution is constrained to

Exploratory Factor Analysis of Civic and Political Engagement Indicators (full sample)			
	Electoral	Civic	Voice
Regular volunteer for nonelectoral organization	0.75	0.12	0.02
Community problem solving	0.69	0.02	0.16
Active member of group	0.65	0.11	0.10
Raised money for charity	0.48	0.10	0.19
Displayed campaign button, sign, sticker	-0.01	0.73	0.09
Donated money to campaign	0.13	0.62	0.14
Regular voter	0.26	0.55	-0.10
Tried to persuade someone how to vote	-0.09	0.55	0.29
Volunteered for candidate or political group	0.33	0.47	0.18
Protested	-0.03	0.00	0.60
Boycotted	0.08	-0.03	0.56
Signed paper petition	0.24	0.13	0.52
Called a talk show	0.03	0.18	0.50
Contacted public official	0.26	0.28	0.47
Contacted the media	0.26	0.11	0.42
Canvassed	0.12	0.24	0.31

three factors, we see a recognizable pattern with the five electoral measures loading on one factor, the five civic indicators loading on another, and the remaining items loading either on a third dimension or weakly on the civic or electoral dimension. Two items on petitions (one electronic, one paper) correlate highly with each other, as do questions about boycotting and "buycotting" and two items about fund raising for charity, so one of each was removed and the analysis repeated. This yields a cleaner solution, especially with respect to the third (or "political voice" dimension), though most of the loadings are not especially high.

Among youth ages 15-19, we find a similar factor solution, though the political voice dimension is not distinct among youth. Contacting public officials fits more comfortably within the civic dimension than either of the other two. Although the loading is not especially high (.49), its presence here implies to us that learning to contact public officials is a skill most likely developed in the types of civic settings characteristic of youth engagement. Notably, among those 20 and older, it is the item with the strongest loading on the first principal component extracted by the factor analysis procedure. In many other analyses with the full sample (not shown here), contacting officials is a behavior that appears to span the three dimensions.

The remainder of our discussion will focus on the civic dimension of youth engagement, and will do so primarily through three indicators we consider to be most appropriate for assessing youth involvement in their communities. We focus on civic, as opposed to other forms of engagement, because the opportunities for civic engagement are more abundant among youth relative to electoral and political voice behavior. Voting is limited to those 18 and older, and contributing money to a political party or candidate is skewed toward older cohorts with greater economic resources. But volunteer activity, working informally with others to solve a problem in one's community, and group activity are not dependent on money and other age-related resources.

Exploratory Factor Analysis of Civic and Political Engagement Indicators (ages 15-19)		
	Civic	Electoral	Voice
Regular volunteer for nonelectoral organization	0.69	0.11	-0.04
Community problem solving	0.68	0.00	0.06
Active member of group	0.59	0.12	0.10
Contacted public official	0.49	0.11	0.14
Canvassed	0.48	-0.01	-0.03
Raised money for charity	0.39	0.11	0.14
Donated money to campaign	0.08	0.66	-0.09
Displayed campaign button, sign, sticker	0.07	0.62	0.04
Tried to persuade someone how to vote	0.05	0.53	0.15
Volunteered for candidate or political group	-0.01	0.51	0.05
Regular voting	0.11	0.51	0.07
Boycotted	0.05	0.36	0.31
Contacted the media	0.27	0.35	-0.01
Signed a paper petition	0.11	0.09	0.74
Protested	0.02	-0.04	0.73
Called a talk show	0.18	0.22	0.28

In general, our questions were derived from items in use on surveys commonly used to assess civic engagement in the U.S. We provide comparisons of our questions with similar items on other instruments as well as a description of the logic and evidence used in developing the version we recommend.

The Measures

Community problem solving is measured with the following two-part question:

Have you ever worked together informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live? IF YES, Was this in the last 12 months or not?

This question is derived from standard indicators on political participation surveys. The American National Election Studies (ANES) and the 1990 American Citizen Participation Study both include a variant of this question, although is slightly different.[3] The important elements to

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[3] American National Election Studies: In the last twelve months, have you worked with others or joined an organization in your community to do something about some community problem?
American Citizen Participation Study: Aside from membership on a board or council or attendance at meetings, I'd like to ask also about informal activity in your community or neighborhood. In the past twelve months, have you gotten together informally with or worked with others in your

this question are the informal nature of the work and the 12-month time frame.

First, the informal nature of the work is critical because of the need to "make sure that survey research does not miss those cases where people get together on their own to solve community problems" (Brady, 2001: 779). Community problem solving is often accomplished through loose and informal networks of people getting together for a single purpose, rather than through the organized activity of groups or citizen involvement in town boards or city councils.

Second, the two part question is used here (and in our volunteering measure) to help distinguish community centered work in the recent past from more distant efforts. This also helps to reduce social desirability bias, or the tendency for respondents to offer a socially appropriate response even if that is not a true reflection of their behavior. In this case, an individual has an opportunity to say "yes" to the question about informal community work and thus "get credit" for having done this before answering the more important part of this question that anchors the behavior in the more recent past. The 12-month time frame was adopted as a reasonable compromise between the desire to provide a span long enough to include people who do not do this activity on a regular basis and yet short enough that people might reasonably remember having done it.[4]

Have you ever worked together informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live? IF YES, Was this in the last 12 months, or not?		
Percent who said...	15-19	20+
Yes, within the last 12 months	23.3	20.6
Yes, but not within the last 12 months	17.9	19.1
No, have not done it	58.4	60.0
Don't know	.4	.3
Total	461	2746

Regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization is measured in the following series of questions:

> *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. IF YES, Have you done this in the last 12 months?*

community or neighborhood to try to deal with some community issue or problem?

[4] The differences between 15-19 year olds and those 20 and older in community problem solving are statistically non-significant. This was true even after transforming the community problem solving indicator into a dummy variable (1=yes, did in the last 12 months; 0=no).

IF YES: I'm going to read a list of different groups that people sometimes volunteer for. As I read each one, can you tell me if you have volunteered for this type of group or organization within the last 12 months?
> *An environmental organization;*
> *A civic or community organization involved in health or social services. This could be an organization to help the poor, elderly, homeless, or a hospital;*
> *An organization involved with youth, children, or education;*
> *Any other type of group.*

Thinking about the work for (type of group) over the last 12 months, is this something you do on a regular basis, or just once in a while?

Volunteering is a very problematic concept. It can include "random acts of kindness" and regular, lengthy, intensive work for organizations or groups. To some extent, the vast array of volunteer opportunities complicates a respondent's ability to remember all that they may have done. But another problem is social desirability bias, since volunteer work is thought to be a praiseworthy activity. Thus it is not surprising that survey estimates of volunteer activity differ greatly.

Our question attempts to balance the need to be inclusive with the need to explicitly exclude some types of activities. We offer a definition of what is meant by volunteer activity in order to ensure respondents do not equate financial compensation with volunteering to help others. As with informal community work, we opted for a "gatekeeper" question to reduce the impact of social desirability bias. Respondents who pass this hurdle are then asked a series of questions about volunteering with different groups.[5]

Overall, our survey found that 33 percent of those 18 and older said they had volunteered in the past 12 months. Shortly after our survey was conducted, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press used the same two-part question – "ever" followed by "past 12 months" – and found that 55 percent of those 18 and older said they volunteered in the past 12 months. Others to report still different estimates of volunteering in the 18 and older population include the 2000 ANES which found 43 percent saying they had volunteered within the past year.[6] The Current Population Survey (CPS) included a volunteering question on one of its 2001 waves and estimated that 28 percent of the population 16 and older had volunteered in the past 12 months

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[5] An additional type of volunteer opportunity included in the list is "a political organization or candidates running for office." This type of work forms the basis of one of the political indicators and is not coded as civic volunteering. It is also important to note that the volunteering measure can be used effectively without the follow up items asking about specific types of organizations.

[6] The ANES question asked the following: Many people say they have less time these days to do volunteer work. What about you, were you able to devote any time to volunteer work in the last 12 months or did you not do so?

(27 percent among those aged 16-19 had done so).[7] And the National Household Education Survey (NHES) found that 50 percent of young people in grades 9-10 had volunteered in 1999 (up from 45 percent in 1996), and that 61 percent in grades 11-12 had done so in 1999 (up from 56 percent in 1996).[8]

However, *regular* volunteer activity appears to be more amenable to reliable measurement. It's plausible that the general question about volunteer activity captures many people who have done something they regard as volunteering but who have not engaged in volunteering for any extended period of time or with any regularity. Inevitably, this results in unreliability; the memory or recognition of the activity is dim and depends on many things other than the underlying construct we are trying to measure (e.g., people may be cued to recall activity by other questions in the survey, or just by chance). By contrast, regular volunteers know that they do this, and almost certainly will pass the gate. A subsequent question about regularity of volunteering weeds out most of the episodic and random activity. The result is more stable incidences from survey to survey. Our spring survey yielded an estimate of 24 percent among those 18 and older. The same questions on an omnibus survey in August 2002 yielded an estimate of 26 percent among those 18 and older. For our younger respondents (age 15-19), 25 percent were regular volunteers. The 1996 NHES survey found 24 percent regular volunteers among those in grades 9-10, and 32 percent in grades 11-12. The Independent Sector finds that in 1996, 46 percent of 18-24 year-olds reported volunteering an average of three hours per week, up from 38 percent in 1995. Among adults, a 2001 Independent Sector survey found that 39 percent of those aged 21 and older volunteer weekly, biweekly, or monthly.[9]

In a subsequent test, we simultaneously fielded two identical polls with two different survey houses in fall 2002. Both polls contained the full volunteer series, but each poll

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[7] The CPS question read as follows: This month, we are interested in volunteer activities, that is, activities for which people are not paid, except perhaps expenses. We only want you to include volunteer activities that you did through or for an organization, even if you only did them once in a while. Since September 1st of last year, have you done any volunteer activities through or for an organization? IF NO: Sometimes people don't think of activities they do infrequently or activities they do for children's schools or youth organizations as volunteer activities. Since September 1st of last year, have you done any of these types of volunteer activities?

[8] Wording for the NHES survey: Now I would like to ask you about community service or volunteer activity in your school or community. This includes ongoing activities like tutoring other students, visiting senior citizens, and so on, but does not include work for pay. It might be something done through your school, through your church or synagogue, or on your own. During this school year, have you participated in any community service activity or volunteer work at your school or in your community? Please tell me what your service activities were this school year. Are you participating in (ACTIVITY) now?

[9] Differences in the rate who report any volunteering in the past year among 15-19 year olds versus those 20 and older are statistically significant; age differences in the rates of *regular* volunteering are not statistically significant.

experimented with question order in order to tell whether responses are affected by other items on the survey. While we still ended up with varying incidences of overall volunteering in the last year, the estimated incidence of regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization came in at 27 percent.

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. IF YES, Have you done this in the last 12 months?		
Percent who said...	15-19	20+
Yes, within the last 12 months	51.5	32.6
Yes, but not within the last 12 months	16.4	26.7
No, have not done it	31.4	40.1
Don't know	.7	.5
Total	461	2746
Percent who report regular volunteering...	15-19	20+
Thinking about the work for (type of group) over the last 12 months, is this something you do on a regular basis, or just once in a while? NOTE: Respondent is coded as regular if he/she reported regular activity with any of the types of groups asked about.	25.2	22.7

Active membership in a group or association is measured with the following pair of items:

> *Do you belong to or donate money to any groups or associations, either locally or nationally? Are you an active member of this group/any of these groups, a member but not active, or have you given money only?*

The measurement of group membership poses challenges akin to those of volunteering. It is well documented that providing respondents a long list of group types, rather than a single generic question about "groups," spurs recollection and leads to a higher estimate of overall group membership (Walker and Baumgartner 1988). Going through a long list of groups on a survey, however, is cumbersome and time consuming. Since one of the objectives of our research was to create a set of measures that could be administered in a relatively compact survey, we sought an efficient solution to this dilemma. In pretests prior to the spring national survey, and in an experiment embedded within it, we attempted to assess the effectiveness of a shorter method of measuring group activity, or one which does not include a long list of groups in which an individual can report membership. Thus, we tested a long form as well as a short form of the group membership question. Our measure also probes about the level and type of activity in groups in order to differentiate between those who are merely members and those who take a more active role. Active membership is self-defined -- those who say they are active members.

The long form question in our experiment asked about membership in each of seven types of groups (e.g., national or local charities, labor unions, business or professional associations, etc.), plus an additional "other" category to capture anything not included in the seven. In the sample as a whole, 78 percent of those asked the long form of the question indicated they belonged to at least one group; in the short form, 55 percent did so. In the long form, 39 percent indicated active membership, while 28 percent did so in the short form. To evaluate the performance of the long and short versions as indicators of engagement, we correlated them with an overall index of participation; there was no significant difference in the correlations for the long and short form. Thus we have a classic question of validity: the short form clearly underestimates the incidence of the behavior, but it provides comparable explanatory power in an analysis of the relationship between group activity and other relevant behaviors.[10]

Percent who report...	15-19	20+
Membership in a group or association	35.8	63.1
Active membership in a group or association	22.7	31.8

NOTE: Summary measures of short and long form group membership questions

Data Quality: Reliability

Civic and political activity is a peripheral concern for many people -- and this is especially the case among young people. One consequence of this is that measures of community based civic activity are not as reliable as one would hope. People may have difficulty remembering activities that are not especially salient to them. Moreover, to the extent that people are unsure whether certain activities fit within the definitions stated or implied in survey questions, the measures will be unreliable. These problems may be especially severe with younger respondents whose lives are busy and who have not yet developed the types of mental categories used by the adult population for sorting activities.

We assess reliability in three ways: (1a) the extent to which our measures yield similar results with the same population at two different points in time or (1b) by two different survey organizations asking the same questions at the same time; (2) the extent to which our measures yield similar results with the *same individuals* at two points in time; (3) the extent to which our items scale with one another, as measured by coefficient *alpha*.

For the population of greatest interest -- youth ages 15-19 -- we have only one survey at one point in time, the spring 2002 survey. However, our survey work in the fall of 2002,

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[10] Differences in group membership and active group membership among 15-19 year olds versus those 20 and older are statistically significant.

whereby we replicated the spring survey in two different field houses in order to verify the reliability of all of the indictors used in our index of participation, provides an opportunity to examine the consistency of response among all adults, and among a comparable group of the youngest respondents, those aged 18 to 29 years. In addition to this replication, we also have panel data for some earlier versions of the volunteering measure, plus several other participation items such as voting, contacting officials, and protesting. These data permit an analysis of the stability of the indicators over time for the same individuals.

Community problem solving

By and large, the question specific to working with others informally to solve a community problem in the last 12 months provides a consistent estimate of how often this behavior is done. Nineteen percent of respondents aged 18 to 29 report doing this in the spring 2002 survey. When this question was repeated in fall 2002 by two different survey organizations, they found incidences of 19 and 18 percent. We do not have panel data on this question.

Volunteering

As noted above, the general question about volunteering produced widely divergent numbers on different surveys. Even the same question with the same respondents produced a relatively low level of consistency in our panel study of New Jersey residents during the fall of 2001. A question asking about volunteer activity for a civic or community organization found only 62 percent of respondents providing the same answer three months later. By contrast, 84 percent gave the same answer to a question about the regularity with which they vote, and 92 percent gave the same answer in both waves when asked whether they had voted in the 2000 general elections.

Although we did not test regular volunteering with a panel survey, regular volunteering for a non-electoral group or organization registers similar estimates across surveys of independent samples. The spring 2002 survey found 22 percent of 18-29 year-olds saying that they regularly volunteer for non-electoral groups, with 23 and 25 percent from the fall 2002 surveys saying that they do so.[11]

Active membership in a group or association

We did not test the reliability of group membership measures with our panels, but in independent samples, estimates of active membership in a group or organization were relatively stable, with a 23 percent estimate in the spring 2002 survey, and slightly fewer reporting the same in the two fall 2002 surveys (18 and 20 percent).

Item analysis and scaling.

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[11] Recall that these estimates are derived from identical questionnaires administered by two different survey organizations.

An index comprised of all 19 indicators of civic and political engagement provides one criterion for assessing the performance of each of the three indicators. Overall, this 19-item index has an *alpha* of 0.69 for the 15-19 year old sample (and 0.76 for those 20 and older). As the table shows, the corrected item-total correlations for each of the three civic items meet or exceed all of the other items in the index: .36 for active membership in groups, .33 for regular volunteering, and .32 for community problem solving.

Item Analysis for Indexes				
	Age 15-19		Age 20+	
	Corrected item-total correlation	Alpha if item deleted	Corrected item-total correlation	Alpha if item deleted
Full 19 item index				
Regular volunteer for non-electoral organization	0.33	0.68	0.41	0.75
Ran/walked/biked for charity	0.25	0.69	0.26	0.76
Community problem solving	0.32	0.68	0.38	0.75
Raised money for charity	0.30	0.68	0.36	0.75
Active member of group	0.36	0.67	0.38	0.75
Regular voter	0.29	0.68	0.30	0.76
Tried to persuade someone how to vote	0.27	0.68	0.31	0.75
Displayed campaign button, sign, stick	0.31	0.68	0.33	0.75
Donated money to campaign	0.29	0.69	0.37	0.75
Volunteered for candidate or political group	0.20	0.69	0.40	0.75
Contacted public official	0.28	0.68	0.45	0.74
Contacted the media	0.26	0.68	0.34	0.75
Called a talk show	0.24	0.69	0.30	0.75
Protested	0.18	0.69	0.25	0.76
Signed an e-mail petition	0.28	0.68	0.28	0.76
Signed paper petition	0.31	0.68	0.42	0.75
Buycotted	0.26	0.68	0.31	0.75
Boycotted	0.33	0.68	0.31	0.75
Canvassed	0.15	0.69	0.26	0.76
Alpha		0.69		0.76
Three item index				
Regular volunteer for non-electoral organization	0.41	0.45	0.48	0.43
Community problem solving	0.38	0.48	0.41	0.52
Active member of group	0.37	0.50	0.38	0.58
Alpha		0.58		0.61

For an index of just the three civic items, coefficient *alpha* is .58 for the youth sample and .61 for those 20 and older. The relatively low alpha indicates that while these three items are tapping a common dimension (especially in relation to other measures of engagement), each

behavior has distinct elements as well (in addition to whatever unreliability exists in the measures themselves). Adding an additional item for general fund raising for charity does not raise the alpha of the three item index, but neither does it lower the value. (By contrast, adding the item on fund raising runs or walks reduces the alpha to .54.) Including *both* the run/walk item and the general fund raising item increases the alpha marginally to .59.

We see participation in fund raising as a potential precursor to other civic behaviors, and thus an activity that may be worth monitoring. But the case is hardly a compelling one, and the inclusion of these items – as with any additional survey questions – comes with a cost.

The additive index of the three civic engagement items does not display an ideal distribution, with over half of the cases among both youth and adults scoring zero. About one quarter (24 percent) receive a score of one, while only 13 percent receive a score of two. Among youth, 7 percent get a score of three (8 percent among adults). The mean score for youth is .71.[12]

Frequency Distribution of Three-Item Civic Index			
	Unweighted Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Score for age 15-19			
0	262	55.8	55.8
1	111	24.4	80.1
2	56	12.9	93.0
3	32	7.0	100.0
Total	461	100.0	
Age 20+			
0	1419	53.8	53.8
1	696	24.6	78.4
2	392	13.2	91.6
3	239	8.4	100.0
Total	2746	100.0	

Validity

The index correlates with several variables to which it is theoretically related, thus providing evidence of validity. The correlations are not high, a result partly attributable to the skewness of the distribution.[13]

Some of these associations, viewed as joint frequency distributions, are more compelling. Youth who have done any of the activities are more likely to attend religious services at least weekly, to have grown up in a household where someone volunteered, to say that they follow what's

Correlation of Three-Item Civic Index with Theoretically Relevant Variables	
Follow government and public affairs	.25
Someone in household volunteered	.29
Heard discussion of politics in household while growing up	.18
Attendance at religious services	.29
Ability to change things in your community	.24

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[12] Differences on the three-item civic index between 15-19 year-olds versus those 20 and older are not statistically significant. The same holds true even after transforming the civic index into a dummy variable (1=1 or more activities; 0 = no activities).

[13] The correlations are, however, all statistically significant at the .01 or lower level.

happening in public affairs, and to feel that they can make a difference in their community.[14]

We also have some qualitative evidence regarding validity. In the summer of 2002, we conducted focus groups with individuals who had done two or more of the activities in a four item civic scale (using the three core items, plus a single item that included both the run/walk and general fund raising for charity). One group consisted of individuals who were active on this civic index, but not active on an electoral index (comprised of the five electoral activities). The other group was composed of "dual activists": people who scored two or higher on both indexes.

	Score on Three-Item Civic Index			
	0	1	2	3
Ability to change things in your community				
A great deal or some difference	39	53	66	77
Little or no difference	61	47	34	23
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Heard discussion of politics in home while growing up				
Very often	9	16	22	34
Sometimes	33	39	32	29
Rarely	44	34	38	30
Never	14	11	8	8
	100%	100%	100%	101%
Someone in household volunteered				
Yes	34	48	57	87
No	66	52	43	13
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Follow government and public affairs				
Most of the time	13	29	25	52
Some of the time	46	47	51	30
Rarely	30	19	21	14
Never	11	5	3	4
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Attendance at religious services				
Once a week or more often	35	44	63	82
Less than once a week	65	56	37	18
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Sample size	261	110	56	32

Although the standard may seem low (simply having done two or more things among the four activities: active group membership, community problem solving, regular volunteering, or some type of fund raising), the people who attended these two groups were clearly engaged and

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[14] The differences between youth scores on the three-item civic index and their engagement in other theoretically relevant behaviors are all statistically significant [see text box on following page].

active. Both groups engaged actively in the discussion and were reluctant to leave at the end. Individuals in these groups described their civic activities in considerable detail, and it was clear that civic engagement was an integral part of their lives. The civic activists (those who did not score two or higher on the electoral index) tended to reject the electoral sphere as a way to address problems in the community, but they were nevertheless very political. The dual activists were very close to the model of the ideal citizen: highly engaged in both the electoral world and the world of direct action and organizing. Our conclusion from these groups was that the indexes discriminated very well. We have not tried to validate other "cut points" along the indexes, but could see very clearly that people who scored two on the civic dimension were highly engaged.

These groups were comprised of adults, and so the relevance of the findings to youth 15-19 is uncertain. But there is no reason to believe that youth would be significantly different from adults. Given that these activities may be more difficult in some respects for young people to undertake, the activists on this measure may be even more distinctive.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Community-based civic engagement is an important behavior to foster among young people (as well as their elders), but measuring it reliably poses challenges. There is a reasonable consensus that volunteering and community problem solving are two central ways in which people participate in civic life. Schools increasingly encourage and even require volunteer work, which often involves community problem solving in addition to direct assistance to others. Our work, as well as research by others, indicates that these civic activities can have significant political relevance and contribute to the development of well rounded citizens who are able to contribute to the health of our democracy. There is less consensus that participation in groups *per se* is a civic activity, but empirically it is clear that much group activity is related to civic participation – or, at the least, that it helps individuals develop skills that transfer readily to civic and political work.

Thus, we believe that all three activities are worth measuring, but as our analysis has shown, this is not an easy task. Part of the problem is conceptual ambiguity; bringing greater clarity by narrowing the definitions or specifying certain kinds of activities would increase the reliability of the measures but could reduce the validity by producing an underestimate of the incidence. With lengthy lists of activities, this problem could be minimized, but the cost in terms of real estate on the survey would be considerable.

Although people who do any one of the three activities are more likely to do the other two, the correlations are not high. Combining the three measures into an additive index provides a reasonable gauge of civic engagement, but the skewed distribution and uncertain reliability of the items makes it less than an optimal tool. In many situations, it may be just as useful to analyze the component items separately as to combine them into an index.

Efforts by schools to promote volunteer activity have been demonstrably successful, and service learning courses, when properly designed and taught, can help students make the critical

linkages between civic life and the broader political world. Although there are many warning signs about the growing disengagement of young people from public life, these measures of civic involvement suggest that the problem may not be as bad as it appears from voting statistics or other indicators of electoral activity. Community based civic engagement among youth is an activity well worth monitoring.

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APPENDIX A
THE 19 CORE INDICATORS OF ENGAGEMENT

Civic indicators
- *Community problem solving.* Have you ever worked together informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live? IF YES, Was this in the last 12 months or not?
- *Regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization.* 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. IF YES, Have you done this in the last 12 months? I'm going to read a list of different groups that people sometimes volunteer for. As I read each one, can you tell me if you have volunteered for this type of group or organization within the last 12 months? An environmental organization; A civic or community organization involved in health or social services. This could be an organization to help the poor, elderly, homeless, or a hospital; An organization involved with youth, children, or education; Any other type of group. Thinking about the work for (type of group) over the last 12 months, is this something you do on a regular basis, or just once in a while?
- *Active membership in a group or association.* Do you belong to or donate money to any groups or associations, either locally or nationally? Are you an active member of this group/any of these groups, a member but not active, or have you given money only?
- *Participation in fund-raising run/walk/ride.* [Now I'm going to read you a quick list of things that some people have done to express their views. For each one I read, please just tell me whether you have ever done it or not. (FOR EACH YES, PROBE: And have you done this is the last 12 months, or not?)] Personally walked, ran, or bicycled for a charitable cause -this is separate from sponsoring or giving money to this type of event?
- *Other fund raising for charity.* And have you ever done anything else to help raise money for a charitable cause?

Electoral indicators
- *Regular voting.* We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely, or never?
- *Persuading others.* When there is an election taking place do you generally talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates, or not?
- *Displaying buttons, signs, stickers.* Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house, or aren't these things you do?
- *Campaign contributions.* In the past 12 months, did you contribute money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates?
- *Volunteering for candidate or political organizations.* From volunteering sequence, respondent indicated having volunteered for "A political organization or candidates running for office"

Indicators of political voice
- *Contacting officials.* [Now I'm going to read you a quick list of things that some people have done to express their views. For each one I read, please just tell me whether you have ever done it or not.   (FOR EACH YES, PROBE: And have you done this is the last 12 months, or not?)] Contacted or visited a public official - at any level of government - to ask for assistance or to express your opinion?

- *Contacting the print media.* Contacted a newspaper or magazine to express your opinion on an issue?
- *Contacting the broadcast media.* Called in to a radio or television talk show to express your opinion on a political issue, even if you did not get on the air?
- *Protesting.* Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration?
- *E-mail petitions.* Signed an e-mail petition?
- *Written petitions.* And have you ever signed a written petition about a political or social issue?
- *Boycotting.* NOT bought something because of conditions under which the product is made, or because you dislike the conduct of the company that produces it?
- *Buycotting.* Bought a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it
- *Canvassing.* Have you worked as a canvasser - having gone door to door for a political or social group or candidate.