

Patterns of Civic Engagement
and Political Participation among Young Women

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Young women's participation in voluntarism has a stronger positive correlation with political participation than among young men (Jenkins 2005). The strength of this relationship suggests that increasing voluntarism among young women could be an effective means of increasing political participation among women. What are current patterns of participation in voluntarism that could illumine opportunities to engage young women, and increase their chances of becoming politically active women? I initially presume that among young women (ages 15 to 22), voluntarism is lower among teenage women and increases as they mature. Thus, advocates of participation should utilize resources to activate young women while they are in their teenage years to accelerate young women's engagement.

In this paper, I review existing political participation and civic engagement research as it pertains to women, young people, and ultimately, young women. At all levels of civic engagement, trends in participation by gender, though not necessarily dichotomous, provide insight for engagement opportunities. For example, men and women follow differing routes to political office – men more likely as an extension of their career in law or business whereas women are more likely to seek elected office after a motivating experience volunteering for an organization (Burns et al. 1997). At a younger age, women in college are more likely than their male counterparts to be interested in a career working for a not-for-profit community organization or foundation and they are less likely to be interested in a career working for government (Hart Research Associates 2008). These patterns of participation may be subtle but are nevertheless important for identifying opportunities for the recruitment of young women to political participation, including voting, contributing to and participating in campaigns,

and running for elected office. By engaging young women, we can close gender gaps in participation and representation.

Finally, I examine recent survey data and patterns among young people to identify whether the best opportunity to engage young women is at the high school level. I find that, contrary to my initial hypothesis, participation actually *decreases* after high school. Thus efforts to engage young women civically and politically need to be strongest during the transition from high school to young adulthood in order to maintain the priority given to voluntarism and increase participation.

A Review of Existing Research: Political Participation

Political scientists have focused an enormous amount of attention on what inclines people to participate in politics. This attention is not surprising given participation's importance in representative democracy. People communicate their preferences and needs through political participation and create pressure on government (Verba et al. 1995). Burns et al. define political participation as "activities that seek to influence either directly or indirectly what the government does," and I will use that definition in this paper (1997). Groups influence policy outcomes through participation or lack of participation. For example, high turnout among low-income voters increases the likelihood of state welfare policy implementation to aid those voters (Hill and Leighley 1992) and an absence of low-income voters increases the likelihood of policy cutting benefits for the poor (Mebane 1994). Those who participate can reap material benefits from their government; the poor in particular pay a high price for not participating. The awareness of a policy and the proximity of its possible effects impact

the extent of mass opinion and behavior feedback (Soss 2007). If political participation is weak among a specific group of citizens, their underrepresentation threatens their equal protection. Further, the potential of disproportionately greater representation from an opposition group also compromises equal protection.

Given the lack of direct benefits of individual participation and if politics is simply about who gets what, political participation is a collective action puzzle. Because political participation is action to create or modify public goods, an incentive exists to “free ride” if others in the group are sufficiently providing for the individual’s needs (Olson 1965). The puzzle becomes, “Why participate?” Instead of focusing on why people *do* participate, much of political participation research addresses the negative alternative, “Why *not* participate?” People do not participate when they lack motivation, capacity, or activation (i.e. recruitment) (Verba et al. 1995).

The three pillars of, or requirements for, political participation—motivation, capacity, and activation – are all attainable through involvement in voluntary organizations. Involvement in institutions (e.g. church, school) and organizations (e.g. Girl Scouts, recreational sports), both early in life as well as later, highly influences motivation and capacity (Verba et al. 1995). These institutions and organizations are a training ground for civic skills, at the very least teaching commitment to one another or to a common cause or belief. Some voluntary organizations may be overt in their relationship to political issues, while in others the relationship is much less direct. In organizations where group discussion and consideration of political issues relevant to the group occur, voluntary organizations increase civic awareness. Voluntary organizations also often serve to nurture political engagement through hands-on experiences with the

community. In fact, they frequently play the same role in many social areas as do governments – assessing need, reallocating resources, and evaluating efforts. For example, a group delivering meals to homebound neighbors has identified an unaddressed social need, found resources to fill the gap, and continued to serve efficiently, as necessary. Voluntary organizations are thus an optimal arena for building interest and skills transferable to political participation (Burns et al. 1997). In addition, activation occurs when people link their personal experiences, in institutions and organizations, to politics. One in five adults says they are *not* politically active because the important things in their life have nothing to do with politics (Verba et al. 1995, 129). If participation in a voluntary organization is important to a person and they identify a link between their experience in the organization and politics, they are more likely to be politically active.

To examine the varied forms of civic and political participation through quantitative survey analysis, political scientists separate voluntary activities into categories. For the purposes of data analysis, Verba et al. classify voluntary activity into three domains: political (engage in at least one political act beyond voting), secular non-political (member or contributor to a non-political voluntary organization or charity), and religious (give time to church activities beyond attending services or give money to church beyond school fees) (1995, 82). While useful for quantitative research, the nomenclature of these groups is misleading. As the analysis will show, secular non-political organizations can be the source of skill-building that applies to political activities (e.g. organizing, running for office) and secular non-political organizations can also be indirectly related to political issues. Thus, the domains can overlap and the

designation of “non-political” can be unduly narrow. Further, religious organizations are frequently intertwined with political issues, as in bishops and abortion in health care reform. In this paper, however, I will use the categories set forth by Verba et al (1995).

Secular non-political organizations (hereafter referred to as simply “non-political organizations”), despite their lack of a direct connection to politics, are a source of political motivation, the first pillar of political participation. Resolving personal problems is not the intention of the bulk of political activity; rather, the intention is to address public issues affecting a community or even a nation (Verba et al. 1995). Thus, without interest in a public issue, a person is unlikely to become politically active. Involvement in a non-political organization, however, often puts a person in touch with a public issue, either directly or indirectly. It fosters an understanding of what the government *is* doing and what the government *could be* doing. Through exposure to these stimuli, a person is likely to develop opinions on what the government *should be* doing – and these opinions serve to motivate political action.

Even in voluntary organizations that are not overtly political, the organizational activity can create the capacities for political participation, the second pillar of participation. Individuals amass the “stockpile” of resources that are the foundation of political action, social networks and social capital. Key civic skills – planning meetings, writing letters, giving speeches – can be and are in fact learned on the job, at church, *and in non-political organizations* (Verba et al. 1995). Though these numbers are lower than the comparisons for a political organization, non-political organizations do nearly as well developing civic skills. Just over half of adults (54%) report the opportunity to practice civic skills in a political organization while just under half (44%) report the same

opportunity in non-political organizations (Verba et al. 1995). Further, data analysis shows that involvement in a non-political organization is a significant predictor of developing civic skills. The effect of involvement in a non-political organization is greater even than the significant effects of job level and religious attendance (Verba et al. 1995). As Verba et al. eloquently summarize the finding: “In short, those who develop skills in an environment removed from politics are likely to become politically competent” (Verba et al. 1995, 310).

Finally, voluntary organizations are sources of political recruitment, whether they are political or non-political organizations. Activation can be a critical component of political participation in particular; one in five adults says they are *not* politically active simply because they have never thought of being involved (Verba et al. 1995). More than one in ten adults, however, was recruited to political action by or in connection with an organization in which they participate (Verba et al. 1995). Further, adults have a higher rate of recruitment in non-political organizations than on the job or in church. In fact, the workplace is a limited source of social capital with many workers pursuing a head-down strategy (Putnam 2000), a behavior likely even more widespread in the current economic climate. Among adults involved with a non-political organization, one in ten was asked to vote or take another political action by the “non-political” organization (Verba et al. 1995). Slightly more, 12 percent, say they recall political matters on meeting agendas, and three in ten say they have been a part of informal political discussions at meetings of the non-political organization (Verba et al. 1995).

Not all organizations embody the above ideals of active participant involvement and discussion, opportunities for engagement, and relevance to the community, however.

Beaumont et al. (2007) point out that the likelihood of volunteer activity leading to political activity is much greater if that volunteer activity does include opportunities to develop political knowledge and organizational and communication skills. Social pressure and incentives to participate are more likely to work in the interest of smaller categorical groups than larger categorical groups (Olson 1965). That is, a young woman is more likely to respond to recruitment to action on behalf of a smaller group such as the homeless shelter with which she volunteers than to recruitment based on identification with a larger group, such as a young voters or women voters. Still, voluntary organizations, political or non-political, can be the incubator of an individual's development of political motivation and capacity and serve as source of activation and are thus worthy of closer examination.

A Review of Existing Research: Participation and Gender

To examine the role of non-political organizations in increasing political participation among young women, I first analyze the similarities and differences between men's and women's participation in non-political organizations and political institutions. A shortcoming of quantitative survey research must be taken into account, however. In survey research, we assume that the terms "politics" and "political" mean the same thing to the researchers and respondents – young and old, women and men – though varied interpretations exist in qualitative research (Taft 2006).

Among adults, patterns of non-political civic participation are not as gendered as patterns of political participation. Civic participation data reveals little variation between men and women's participation in non-political organizations, a testament to women's

longtime role in civic groups. The histories of men's and women's *political* participation, however, are starkly different from one another. Despite the often blurred lines between political and non-political engagement, some gender gaps still persist in political institutions today, such as the gross underrepresentation of women elected officials in the U.S Congress compared to women's representation in the general population or among those qualified (Kenney et al. 2009).

Men and women have similar patterns of engagement in non-political organizations. They are equally likely to participate in voluntary non-political organizations – 66 percent of women and 67 percent of men indicate involvement on a regular basis (Burns et al. 1997, 79). Within non-political organizations, men and women report similar opportunities to practice civic skills (Verba et al. 1995, 319). Recruitment to political activity from within a non-political organization is also similar across gender – nine percent among women and 10 percent among men (Verba et al. 1995, 376). Thus, in the sphere of non-political voluntary activity, women and men seem to be on relatively even ground.¹

In the political sphere, women had been politically active long before they got the vote, showing just how important it is to conceptualize politics broadly (Skocpol 2003). Women's involvement in the period before suffrage was largely charitably-oriented and motivated by a desire to serve and improve the community (Schlozman et al. 1995). These non-political organizations however were often women's only portal to *political* activity. They offered opportunities for women to develop civic interests and leadership skills at a time when women were not allowed such roles in the business or political

¹ Again, non-political refers to *secular* non-political organizations in this paper. For analysis of participation by gender in religious organizations, see Burns et al. 1997.

spheres (Burns et al. 1997). The explicit purpose of post-war women's groups was educational or civic and non-partisan, rather than political. Yet, the groups served as nascent interest groups, experimenting with structure, identity, and strategy and creating paths for women's activism in political interest groups (Mathews-Gardner 2005). These skills were further applied by women in political activities including campaigning for the vote, working to secure temperance, and advocating for legislation (Skocpol 2003).

Adding to the historical differences in men's and women's participation, it was common to segregate voluntary organizations by gender (e.g. the YMCA and the YWCA), creating and reinforcing gendered interpretations of activism and politics and influencing issue agendas (Mathews-Gardner 2005). Though debates continue, some research has provided evidence of gendered priorities in civic and political participation. These variations by gender are not necessarily dichotomous, but rather tendencies. In civic life, women are more likely than men to choose political activities that tie politics to their daily lives than men (Hooghe and Stolle 2004), such as signing petitions for local policy changes or engaging with their child's school board.

Schlozman et al. assert that compared to men, women elected officials have "distinctive attitudes" and that these attitudes are evident in their priorities (1995). Women legislators champion issues of women, children and families more often than their male counterparts (Schlozman et al. 1995) and women in the U.S. House of Representatives are more likely to support policies of gender equity, day care, flex time, reproductive freedom, and food stamps – even when controlled for party, region, and district demographics (Burrell 1996). Schlozman et al. conclude that women in politics

are more likely than men to anchor their participation in concern for the good of the community in order to “derive civic gratifications from their participation” (1995, 268).

The historically blurred line between political and non-political participation among women results in political participation gender gaps that are neither clear nor consistent across types of political engagement. Men and women demonstrate similar participation on several measures. In analysis of the Civic Participation Study, women and men prioritize the same types of political activities with no significant difference in terms of amount of activity (Schlozman et al. 1995). Men and women cite similar motivations for their political involvement with no gender more likely than the other to cite material, civic, policy, and social motivations (Verba et al. 1995). Finally, men and women also demonstrate similar levels of intensity on engagement measures of political interest, political efficacy, and strength of party identification (Verba et al. 1995). The similarities above demonstrate that women are not inherently apolitical. In fact, when active politically, women give more hours to politics than do men (Burns et al. 1997, Verba et al. 1995).

Though several studies show a gender gap in political knowledge favoring men, more recent investigation is revealing that men’s greater willingness to guess explains a significant proportion of the gap (Mondak and Anderson 2004, Verba et al. 1997). On four multiple choice political knowledge questions, the rate of choosing “don’t know” among women was 25.9 percent, compared to 13.8 percent among men (Mondak and Anderson, 503). Even when encouraged *not* to answer “don’t know,” women are still more likely than men to choose “don’t know” – 4.6 percent among women compared to 1.6 among men (Mondak and Anderson 2004, 503). In Mondak and Anderson’s study,

the guessing effect was found to account for about half of the gender disparity in political knowledge (2004, 501). Thus, methods to accurately measure actual political knowledge and compare findings across gender are yet to be found and data showing gender gaps in political knowledge should be assessed with caution.

Men are slightly more interested in politics than women, however. Verba et al. find a gender gap when they measure interest in political information – men are slightly more engaged than women (1995). Additional data shows that women are less interested in politics in general and in national politics than are men (Verba et al. 1995). Recruitment to political activity is higher among men – 55 percent report being asked within an organization to get involved politically, compared to 50 percent of women (Verba et al. 1995). Further, men are more likely than women to indicate involvement with an organization that takes political stands – 53 percent compared to 44 percent (Burns et al. 1997).²

Significant gender gaps favoring men also endure in electoral ambition and representation, evidence that people construct political ambition in men more so than women. Women are less likely than men to consider running for electoral office, less likely to actually run, and less likely to express interest in running in the future (Lawless and Fox 2005). Institutional barriers to women’s candidacies exist, including men’s incumbency advantage and the low proportion of women in pipeline careers (Lawless and Fox 2005). Yet, in the Citizen Political Ambition Study, gender remains a significant predictor of who ultimately launches a political career (Lawless and Fox 2005).

Attitudinal dispositions and personal experiences motivate a run for office, more so than

² This data is limited though to the assumption that there is not a gender difference in the understanding of what “taking a political stand” means.

the political opportunity structure (Lawless and Fox 2005). Adding a measure of whether the respondent receives personal encouragement to run for office, Lawless and Fox find that such recruitment increases the probability that the respondent will consider candidacy by 45 percentage points (Lawless and Fox 2005). Yet, women have a lower likelihood of receiving such encouragement, contributing to the gender gap in political candidacy (Lawless and Fox 2005). The good news is that gender gaps in the electoral process are less substantial once a woman is on the ticket. In Minnesota, analysis of legislative campaigns since 1997 shows that party endorsement, primary competition, general election votes, and fundraising are all gender-neutral, if not slightly to women candidates' advantage (Kenney et al. 2009). Based on women candidates' success rates (controlling for incumbency), if more women run for office, more women will be elected to office (Darcy et al. 1993, Kenney et al. 2009). Thus, analysis exposes some gender gaps in political participation among adults overall, but few gender gaps in non-political participation. To narrow the focus further, I will examine trends in participation among young adults specifically.

A Review of Existing Research: Voluntarism and Young People

Patterns in voluntarism among young people reveal a more complex relationship between political and non-political participation than among adults. Further, similarities among young women and men raise questions about how gender gaps emerge in adulthood. Young people in America are active volunteers and their participation at a young age increases the likelihood of voluntarism in adulthood. The link between voluntarism and public policy and politics, however, is not readily evident in young

people's attitudes. Some see non-political voluntarism and political participation as alternate means to an end rather than as complementary means to an end. In an initial review of gender patterns among young people, young women and men volunteer at similar rates, but young women's voluntarism has a higher correlation with political participation (Jenkins 2005). Yet, as we have seen, adult men are more active in politics than adult women in several respects. A differing perception between men and women of "politics" and gender roles in politics is developed at a young age and is likely the cause of this disparity.

Young people volunteer at high rates, initiating habits and building connections that make them more likely to continue volunteering in adulthood. Nearly seven in ten young Americans volunteer, belong to an organization, or work with others to solve a community problem:

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 (Hart 1998).

Research also shows that young people who are civically active are more likely to remain active throughout their lives. Students completing required community service programs continue to volunteer more intensively than those who did not participate in a required program (Yates and Youniss 1998). Based on a longitudinal analysis of young people's civic and political behavior, data reveals that students who participate more in religious and extracurricular activities are also more likely to volunteer and believe community service is important (Smith 1999). Additionally, extracurricular participation is increasingly important in developing a young person's sense of self-worth and self-

esteem as the student moves from 8th grade to high school graduation (Smith 1999). Hooghe and Stolle find that non-school related youth participation reveals strong effects of participation on attitudes, network integration, and mobilization (2003). In other words, young people who are active as teenagers and young adults are more likely to respond positively to recruitment as later in life.

People establish attitudes and behavioral patterns at an early age (Hooghe and Stolle 2004), and it is thus essential that we promote young people's involvement in the political process while they are malleable and open-minded. Studies have found that cynicism and disinterest in government participation increase as people age, regardless of their formal civic education (Gibson 2001). Longitudinal research also shows that extracurricular and volunteer activities "play a role as a socializer, developing in young people the norms, attitudes, and skills conducive to later adult political and civic participation" (Smith 1999, 572). Further, being raised in a politicized environment increases the likelihood of considering a run for office and holds across gender (Lawless and Fox 2005). The most effective time to engage a person in civic activities to increase the likelihood of a lifetime of civic and political participation is when they are young.

Young people view their voluntarism as a positive contribution that influences their community, and it is their preferred form of political participation. The majority of young people believe they can make a difference, and this belief does not vary significantly by gender (CIRCLE 2006). A survey by Harvard University found that more than a quarter of students would classify volunteering for a community organization as a political activity (Beaumont et al. 2007) – further evidence of a blurred line between non-political and political organizations. When it comes to conventional political

activities like voting or joining a campaign, however, students are less likely to think such activities are the most efficacious way to contribute. They want to contribute in less institutional ways than previous generations (Ad Council/Pew 2000). College students are more likely to agree that volunteer work with organizations that help the needy can bring social change than to agree that conventional political activity brings social change (Beaumont et al. 2007). For example, they see more value in working in the soup kitchen than in voting for policy that would assist the hungry. Analysis of political participation that ignores the broader definition of political activity that young people are creating will fail to accurately assess young people's interest in political issues.

Young people's current voluntarism, however, can be individualist and episodic as a result of their distrust of government and its institutions (Gibson 2001). Linking voluntarism with politically relevant issues could increase long-term engagement among young people (Gibson 2001). With strong positive attitudes about the impact of voluntarism, young people are more likely to commit to long term participation – a commitment that makes them more likely to develop the capacity and find the motivation for political participation, as well as increased likelihood of recruitment to political participation.

Young people have gendered opinions of formal political institutions, political participation, and voluntarism. These attitudes are driven by the history of political involvement and opportunity by gender, including feminist social movements, the set of common issues women tend to coalesce around, and the current representation of women and men in politics. First, many women have historically eschewed associating their civic activities with political activities. One of the oldest civic women's groups, the

Women's Division of Christian Service, participated in public affairs activism motivated by public interest but avoided political issues which they believed to be driven by partisanship and lobbying (Mathews-Gardner 2005).

Second, young women would rather focus on immediate, personal and consensual concerns of their community than “the ‘who gets what’ world of politics” (Jenkins 2005, 3). Burns et al. note that disparities in opinion among women and men are more apparent with respect to so-called “compassion issues” such as welfare and education (1995). The inclination toward hands-on community issues among women may make the political system of debate and policy less appealing to women.

Third, the number of women in elected office is not proportionate to the general population of women nor is the electoral ambition among women. Women are just 17 percent of the U.S. Congress (CAWP 2009). A survey of college students demonstrates a significant electoral ambition gap – just 16 percent of young women said they would be interested in running for federal elected office compared to 45 percent of young men (Hart Research Associates 2008). The electoral ambition gap persists even at the state and local level, with 36 percent of men interested compared to just 16 percent of women (Hart Research Associates 2008). Lawless and Fox found the largest gender gap in political ambition among the youngest age group in their study (under age 40) (2005). “If the images that young women continue to see are of politically powerful men, politics and government will likely not resonate to the extent that they do with young men” (Jenkins 2005, 3).

Further, the term “politics” means something different to women than men, even at a young age. Among teenage girls, qualitative research shows that girls who are active

in policy-related organizations and community activities still distance themselves from the term “politics” (Taft 2006). In the research, many girls narrowly defined politics as government or voting (Taft 2006). While the girls were actively engaged in community involvement, social change, and civic groups and associated themselves with such, Taft concludes that the girls view politics as the opposite of those forms of engagement (2006). One girl stated, “Politics definitely sounds worse than social change. To me it goes along with the government, it is just a whole bunch of bullshit... but social change is more involved with real people and getting in there and trying to really do something” (Taft 2006, 339). Additionally, the girls in Taft’s research associated politics with people unlike them (2006). “Regardless of whether politics is accurately reflected in cultural and media discourse, its representation may alienate young women” (Jenkins 2005, 3). These differences in perceptions of politics influence interest and motivation in political and non-political participation.

Girls’ disinterest with politics, as defined narrowly by them, and their strong interest in community and social change point to non-political voluntary organizations as a natural starting point for activism. Taft suggests that:

Rather than trying to combat disaffection, those interested in increasing youth political engagement should help youth increase their efficacy as political outsiders *and* work with them to democratize the decisions that affect their lives, creating opportunities for real political voice, not simply token inclusion (2006, 349).

Among 14-year-olds, girls are equally as interested as boys in civic engagement activities and a gender gap emerges favoring girls’ interest on several activities (Hooghe 2004). In fact, the gap is widest when it comes to volunteering – girls are 25 percentage points *more* likely than boys to express an intention to volunteer. Thus, voluntarism could be a

salient point of entry for young women in particular into political activities, rather than an alternative to political activity.

On measures of electoral engagement, young men and women differ as well. Among young women ages 20-25, 25 percent report being a regular voter compared to 28 percent of young men ages 20-25, though young women have had consistently higher rates of voter turnout than young men since 1984 (CIRCLE 2006). On all other electoral activities, however, young men are more active and more interested than young women. One in five young men, ages 15 to 25, reports participating in at least two forms of electoral engagement in the last year, compared to 13 percent among young women (CIRCLE 2006). Given these differences, isolating and examining young women's participation will provide insight into patterns specific to young women.

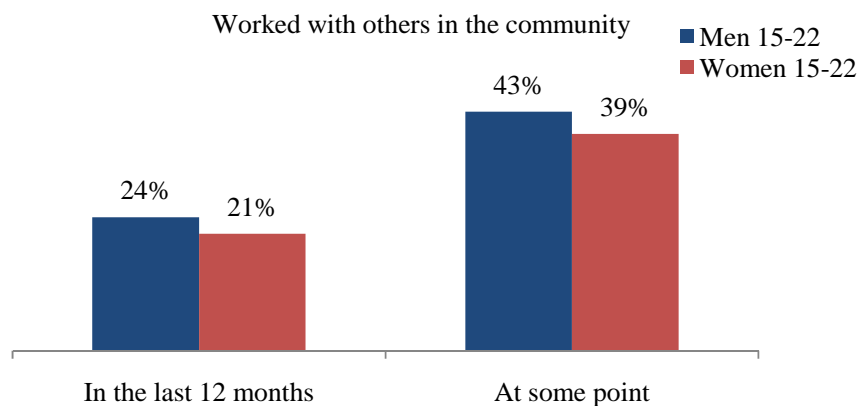
Analysis of Recent Surveys of Young People

Recent surveys of young people provide measures of their political interest and participation levels as well as their non-political civic engagement. In this section, I use raw data from the 2006 Civic and Political Health Survey³ to explore young people's participation from two angles. First, given that young men and women have gendered perspectives of and interest in politics, I analyze patterns of participation among young adults ages 15 to 22, comparing gender trends to determine whether the unique perceptions result in differences in participation by gender. Second, to identify the most

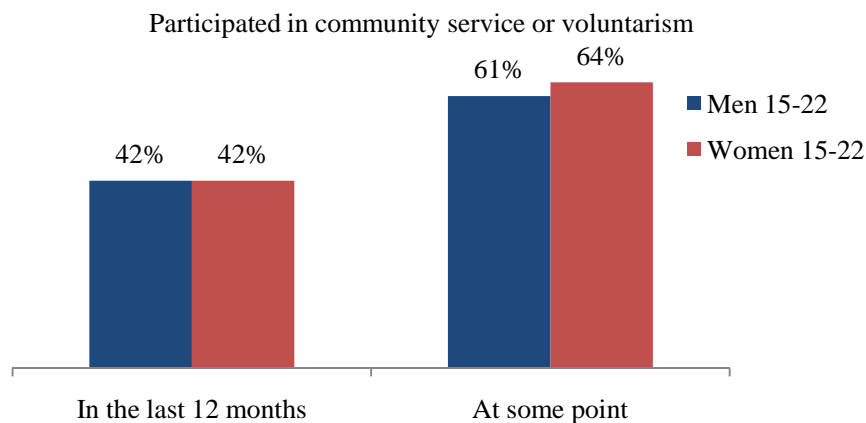
³ The June 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation survey is a product of The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and is conducted every four years. Though the survey sample includes men and women ages 15 to 25, my analysis focuses on the data for young people ages 15 to 22.

opportune time to engage young women, I examine patterns of participation among teenage girls (ages 15 to 18) compared to young adult women (ages 18 to 22).⁴

Young men and women have similar patterns of participation in non-political organizations, though the types of organizations for which they work and their attitudes toward voluntarism vary by gender. Young men are slightly more likely to say they have worked with others in the community to solve a problem (43% compared to 39%).

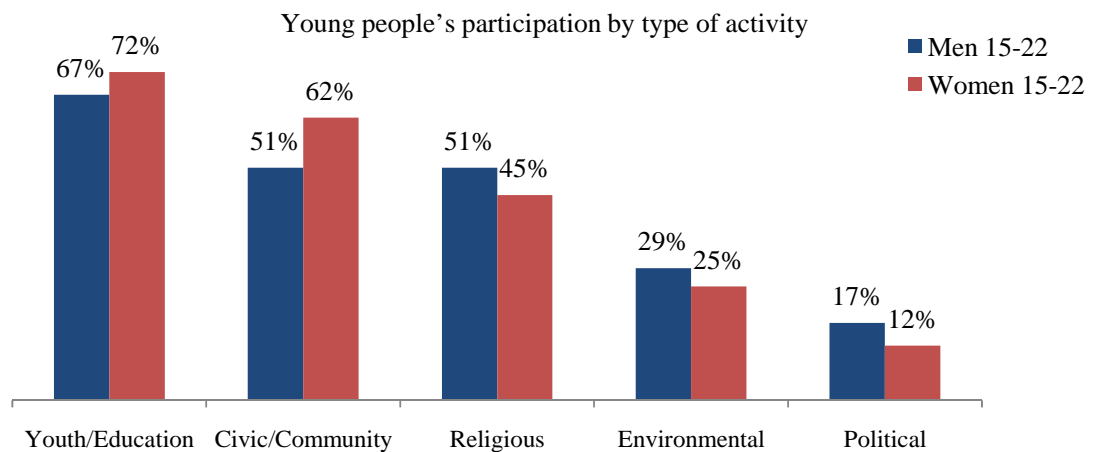


Young women are slightly more likely than young men however to say they have been a part of community service or voluntarism (64% compared to 61%).

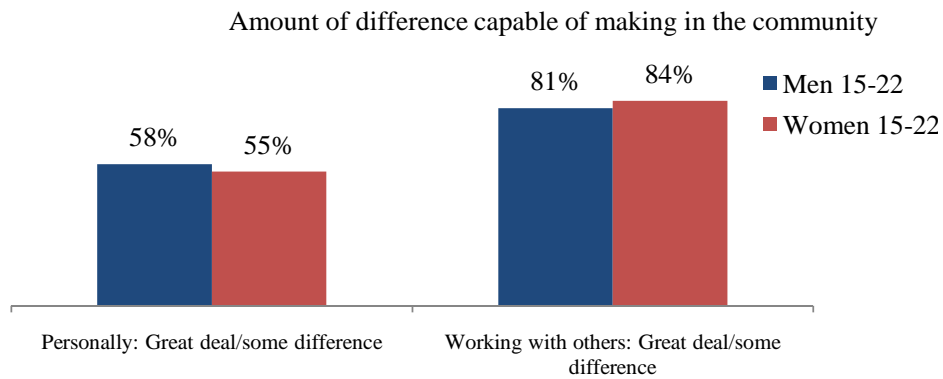


⁴ I chose to overlap the age groups, including 18 year olds in both groups, to mitigate any differences that would be due to some 18 year olds enrolled in high school while other 18 year olds were either not enrolled in school or college students.

Breaking the data down by the types of volunteer activities in which young people participate, more significant gender patterns emerge. Young women are more likely than men to participate in organizations related to youth and education and civic and community needs. Young men are more likely than women to participate in religious and environmental voluntary activities. Though both young men and young women are least likely to say they participate in voluntarism related to politics, young men are five points more likely to do so than young women.

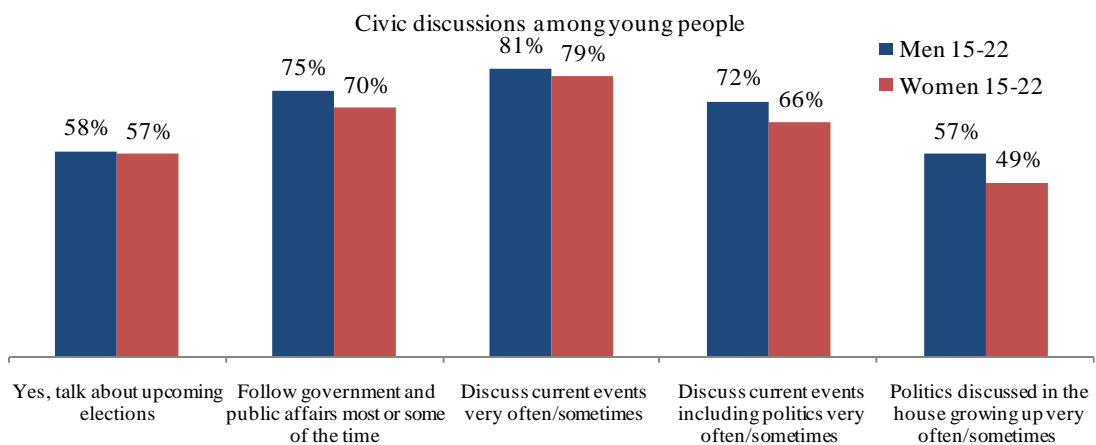


Young men and women also differ slightly in their attitudes toward voluntarism and their attitudes about their influence through voluntarism. Young men are more likely than women to believe they personally can make a difference in solving problems in their community. Young women are slightly more likely than men to believe that people working together can make a difference in the community.

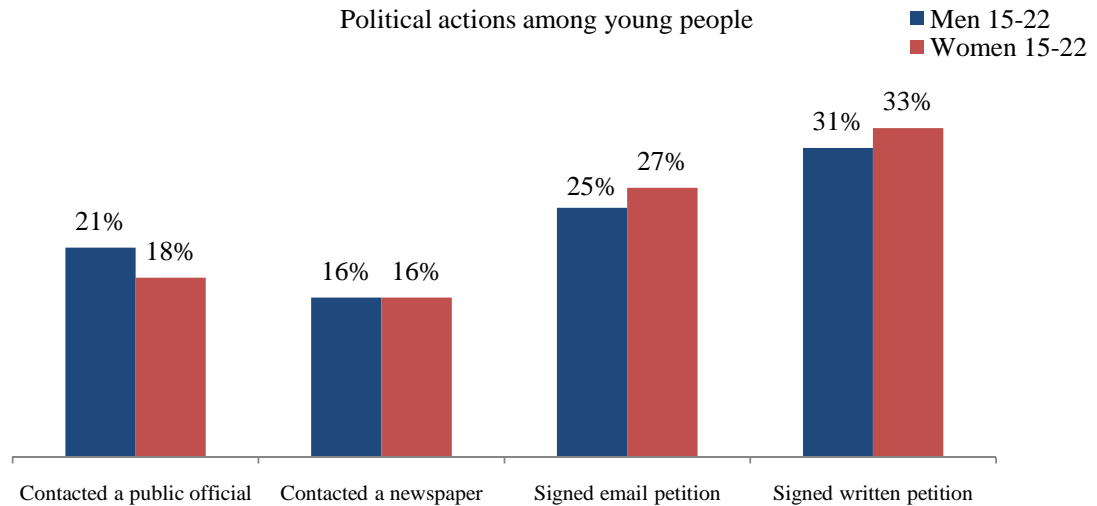


Young women are also slightly more likely than men to believe it is their *choice* to get involved to make things better in their community (60% compared to 56%) while young men are slightly more likely to say it is their *responsibility* (41% compared to 38%).

On political measures, variations by gender are also small, but provide some insight. Young men and women discuss upcoming elections and current events a comparable amount of time. Young men, however, are more likely than women to say they were exposed to political discussions growing up, follow government and political issues and news, and discuss current events including politics.



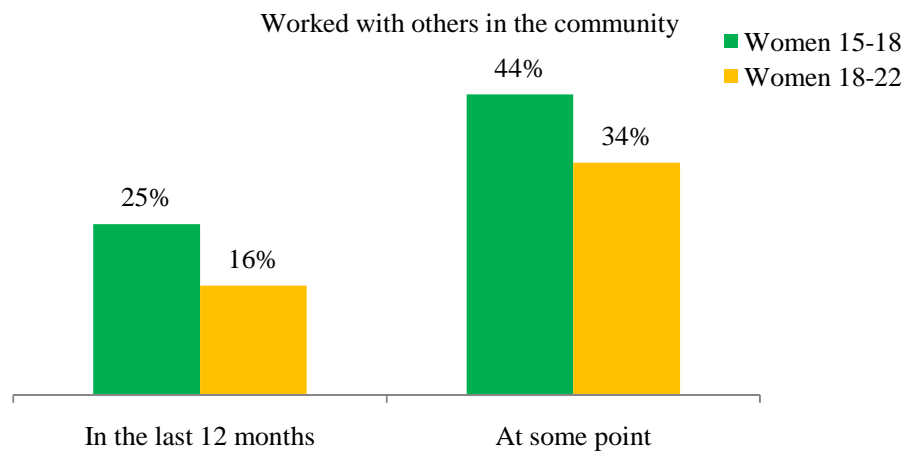
While young men are more likely than women to contact a public official, young women are more likely than men to sign online and written petitions. Both genders are equally likely to contact a newspaper.



Participation patterns do not vary widely among young people and these similarities by gender are counterintuitive given other gender gaps that exist. For example, young men and women are nearly equal in non-political participation, yet girls have a stronger interest in voluntarism than boys at a young age. Also, young men and women are nearly equal in their non-political participation, yet men more readily enter formal politics in adulthood. Non-political participation plays a role in young women's political participation, however; the correlation between voluntarism and political engagement is stronger among young women than young men (Jenkins 2005). If young women participated in voluntarism at higher levels, perhaps there would be a corresponding increase in the number of young women willing to engage with politics and government. The exact role voluntarism plays in future political participation, specific to young women, remains unknown. Simply being on par with men in non-

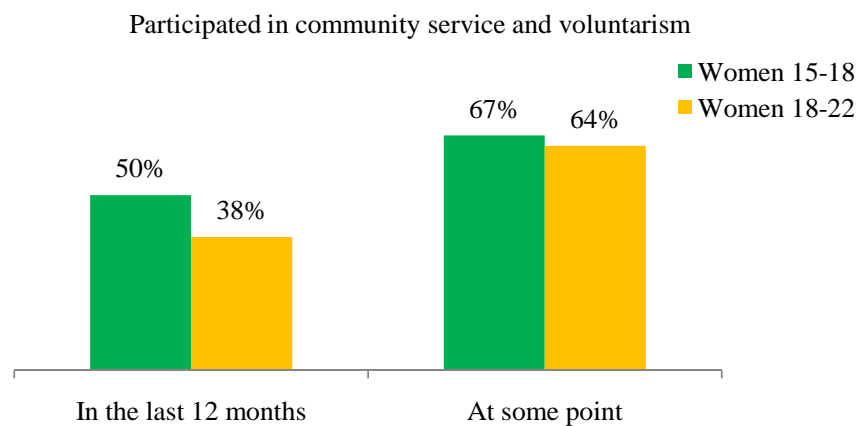
political activities may not be enough to close the gap in political participation; the answer may be in how young women and men participate within these organizations and their view of their participation, more so than just their membership in the organization.

Within the subgroup of women ages 15 to 22, key differences emerge between teenage girls and young adult women in participation and attitudes. I hypothesized that voluntarism would be lowest among the youngest cohort of women (teenage girls ages 15-18) and increase among young adult women (18-22). Rather, the data below shows that teenage girls are more likely to be active volunteers than young adult women. Among the teenage girls, 44 percent reported working together with others to solve a problem in their community, compared to only 34 percent of young adult women. A quarter (25%) of teenage women said they have done so in the past 12 months, compared to 16 percent among young adult women. This trend is consistent with psychological research finding that girls are more confident when they are younger, and thus more likely to take on problems in their community (Brown and Gilligan 1992).

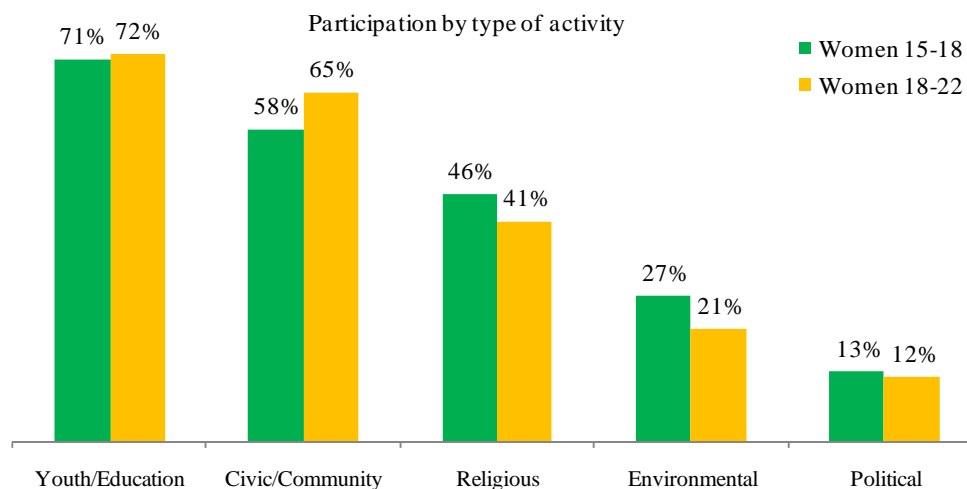


A similar pattern occurs in formal participation in a community service or volunteer activity in the last 12 months. Though nearly equal numbers in each age group

report community service or voluntarism at some point in their lives (67% among teenage girls and 64% among young adult women), teenage girls are more likely than young adult women to report recent community service or volunteer activity participation. Half of teenage women (50%) reported community service or voluntarism in the last 12 months, compared to just 38 percent of young adult women.



Among those who have participated in community service or volunteer activities in the last year, young adult women are more likely than teenage girls to have participated in activities focused on youth and education and civic or community-focused activities. Teenage girls are more likely than young adult women to have participated in religious or environmental volunteer activities. Surprisingly, little to no difference appears between the age groups in their participation in political voluntarism, despite that the young adult women are now eligible voters.



Young women overall feel a sense of efficacy in their community. A majority said they believe a group of people working together can make some or a great deal of difference in solving problems (84%) and this sentiment is true among both teenage girls (86% some or great deal) and young adult women (82% some or great deal). Teenage girls are slightly more confident than young adult women in how much difference they *personally* can make in their community. Three out of five (60%) teenage girls said they think they personally can make some or a great deal of difference in their community, while just over half (51%) of young adult women felt that way. Young adult women are motivated by something other than responsibility, however. Less than two in five say it is their *responsibility* to get involved to make things better. They are more likely to say it is their *choice* to get involved to make things better.

Though the data analysis does not reveal blatant gender gaps in young people’s participation, interesting gaps are found in participation between teenage girls and young adult women. It appears that civic engagement drops off among young adult women, just as they reach voting age and at a time when the link between their high school civic engagement and future political participation is most important. In further analysis,

however, the drop off is not unique to women – teenage boys are also more active in the community and in voluntarism than young adult men. Is the post-high school decrease a rut from which young people recover later in life, or do we never regain participation levels observed in among high school age students? Further research should explore if and when participation increases again.

Discussion

A civic engagement link is clearly missing between high school and adulthood. Gibson concurs, “There is also growing awareness of the necessity to provide youth with *ongoing* education and experiential opportunities throughout the school years, including college, indicating that more work needs to be done in finding ways to work cross-institutionally” (2001, 16). Though there are clearly gendered interpretations of politics, a gender gap in civic participation is not significant among young people. Rather, the decrease in participation upon adulthood occurs among both men and women. Young people are already participating in voluntary activities in high school, but in order to significantly increase participation, we need to find ways to continue to recruit young people to both political and non-political organizations once they turn 18. If we can find a way to bridge the institutional frameworks of high school with post-high school environments, civic and political participation will increase.

Adolescents and high school age teenagers are likely active in their community as a result of a school, church or family-invoked participation, and yet the structure these institutions provide often disappears post-high school. Upon graduation from high school, life changes dramatically. Many teenagers move away from home, not only

leaving school, but also likely their local church and their family. It could be that participation is lower among young people ages 18 to 22 because time is necessary for them to become engaged in either a new community or in the same community but on a different level now that they are independent adults. Further, they could disengage as a result of less free time due to time spent working to support themselves financially, a more rigorous commitment to education than was necessary in high school, or more time devoted to developing personal relationships. Verba et al. found, “activity frequently takes place in the context of rich interpersonal networks... [It] seems that personal connections among acquaintances, friends, and relatives – often mediated through mutual [non-political] institutional affiliations – are still crucial for political recruitment” (1995, 17). Without networks to other generations, many young people are without a source of potential recruitment, the third pillar of political participation.

Ironically, as these young people leave home and leave the framework of community participation they have built throughout high school, is just when we call on them to demonstrate their commitment to the community through voting and other forms of political participation. Smith suggests that political and civic participation may in fact be *negatively* impacted by post-secondary education in the short-term:

It is quite plausible that those who go on to college are socialized more into the norms of participation. It is equally plausible that college makes political and civic engagement more difficult, given the more transitory and mobile nature of being away at school (1999, 574).

Barriers to voter registration can also be a problem for young people who have relocated since high school. Further, a candidate’s willingness to engage young people in their campaign or get out vote among this group plays a significant role in young people’s opportunities for engagement.

While Putnam's research addresses the question of what competence we should require of citizens (or what level of social capital we can expect them to possess), Rubenson asserts that we must further ask "How is this competence generated and how do we uphold it over time?" (Putnam 2000, Rubenson 2000, 14). The analysis in this paper demonstrates that young people can develop competence through voluntarism in non-political organizations, seemingly equally among young women and young men. Yet, there exists a need for mechanisms to uphold the engagement over time. How can we motivate young people to continue civic participation post-high school, maintaining and even increasing their participation as they grow older? Are there community support systems missing in the transition from high school to adulthood that would foster continued participation? If we were able to keep young women, in particular, active following high school, would they be in a better position to transfer their motivation and capacity into politics? And further, would there be more opportunities for the recruitment of these young women? Answering these questions should be a priority for groups with a mission to increase democratic participation, particularly among young women.

Recommendations

As their lives become busier with independence, higher education, and working to support themselves financially, young people are less likely to look for opportunities to get involved in civic or political participation and this trend applies to both young women and young men. However, given their past experiences, young people are primed to be recruited to such activity and will likely respond positively if outreach is specifically

targeted toward them. The following are recommendations for nonprofit organizations and political organizations with the goal of engaging more young people.

- Nonprofit organizations with multiple branches or chapters, like United Way or Habitat for Humanity, could provide stability in the student's transition from high school to adulthood. Coordinate across branches, connecting graduating students with the branch or chapter in the student's new community, or with an organization with similar goals.
- Nonprofits can use social networks to network their volunteers. Create a Facebook fan page and include links to fan pages of organizations in other areas that have similar goals. Also ask those organizations to link to your fan page. Members of the fan page can use it as a resource to find trusted organizations in their new community.
- In new communities, young people need introduction to and information about organizations with which they can get involved but they are unlikely to seek it out. Reach out to college students at the beginning of each semester through residence halls and provide information that eliminates barriers to volunteering, such as information about bus routes and schedules to get to the organization's location.
- Nonprofits can use relocating young people as a constant stream of new volunteers. Ask current young volunteers to replace themselves if they can no longer commit time and encourage graduating college students to recruit a freshman.
- A one-time connection to the organization may be enough to bring young volunteers back. Reach out to companies that hire large numbers of high school graduates and request day of service once a quarter for new employees hired that quarter.

- Political organizations can help young people realize the connection between the voluntary organization and public policy issues. Reach out to voluntary organizations and request permission to distribute literature to volunteers on how to take political action on the issues the organization addresses. For example, provide homeless shelter volunteers with the latest information on welfare policy and ways they can get involved politically on behalf of the people they serve.
- Political organizations that exist to get out the vote among young people (e.g. MTV's Rock the Vote) often run highly visible campaigns but lack follow-up after events and go dark between election cycles. Keep young people engaged and the organization active between cycles by creating volunteer initiatives and maintaining a blog or website with volunteer opportunities. By engaging young people in voluntarism, they will be easier to mobilize come election season.
- Political organizations have the opportunity to boost the confidence of young volunteers and perhaps make them more likely to consider running for elected office or party seats. Create a monthly award that recognizes a young volunteer in the community and invite the honorees to an annual small gathering with local elected officials. Further, offer internship opportunities for young people to work directly with campaign directors or elected officials.
- Media, corporations, and academic institutions can motivate non-profit organizations to involve young people by creating an award for organizations that do so. For example, the Center on Women and Public Policy at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs sponsors the Young Women's Leadership Award, presented

to an organization that demonstrates commitment to advancing young women in leadership roles.

Capitalizing on the link between voluntarism and political participation is a strategic approach to sustaining engagement between the teenage years and young adulthood.

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