

Measuring the Relational Aspects of Civic Engagement and Action

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Abstract: Civic leaders who are highly and effectively engaged often have strong relationships with key stakeholders across institutions and communities. The prevalence and nature of these relationships is not known among those with more typical levels of civic engagement. We were interested in the perceptions of likelihood of individual versus community action on particular topics. We surveyed a random sample of residents of two neighboring French towns and found that people perceive their neighbors to be, on average, more engaged than they perceive themselves to be, and that few individuals can provide specific action steps for how they would tackle social issues in their community. These results suggest that teaching civic action skills, including how to identify key decision makers as possible allies, is important for civic educators.

Key words: civic action, civic education, civic engagement, France

Introduction

The field of social studies seeks to develop good citizens by exploring curricular material that could help students construct a better society (Evans, 2004). Dewey (1938) extended this argument, suggesting that (1) experience was the best way for students to learn, and (2) this experiential education was needed as the cornerstone not just in social studies but in all traditional school subjects. Indeed, nearly a century later, education systems around the world are still attempting to heed this call, providing service learning opportunities, internships, and various other constructivist methods for students' "experiential development."

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<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

Despite these experiential opportunities for students to develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, students have fewer opportunities as adults to continue to practice these skills and dispositions. Since the 1950s, American participation in voluntary associations, a space where American adults have often practiced (and children have often witnessed) democratic living, has declined (Putnam, 2001). (Participation in such associations is associated with civic engagement (Rice et al., 2016).) What Tocqueville (1835) once regarded as the most important piece for understanding American civic culture has been in rapid free-fall for half a century, replaced by engagement in social media and donations to large, staffed organizations. Others have found that civic self-efficacy is associated with civic collective efficacy (the likelihood that members of their community will act) (e.g., Collins, Neal, & Neal, 2014), underscoring its importance.

Despite recent not-for-profit organizations attempting to engage youth in the democratic process through afterschool (e.g., the Center for Urban Pedagogy) and in-school (e.g., Generation Citizen (2011)) programs, youth often do not see such civic engagement in the lives of adults around them. Since many students today do not witness adults practicing democracy, they also do not get to meet others in the community who are not close friends. This civic isolationism limits youths' abilities to learn how civic life operates in authentic ways, which limits their abilities later to engage in civic life (Fitzgerald, 2017). Making connections with civically engaged community members and learning from their experiences enables youth to both witness examples of civic engagement and participate in that process, thereby constructing their own civic lives.

Action civics

One of the most pro-active, collaborative models of authentic civics education has been the action civics model (Fitzgerald & Andes, 2012), which emphasizes collective action, student voice and agency, and reflection rather than strict adherence to traditional political knowledge (Maker, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Pope, 2015; Pope, Stolte, & Cohen, 2011). Initially, such programs were paired with more traditional civics knowledge. For example, the action civics program Project Citizen was designed to be paired with the *We the People* curriculum (Center for Civic Education, 2014) so that students could develop their understanding of Constitutional principles in class while they practiced engaging in public policy, following Larry Gerston's (2002) model (Haas, 2001). The result of these pairings was action civics work that enabled students to focus on school-based issues.

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More recently, action civics programs have been developed with much less of an emphasis on a “knowledge base” component that textbooks traditionally espouse. Rather, these programs embed with currently taught social studies classes, either using trained “democracy coaches” (e.g., Generation Citizen, 2011) or by training the social studies teachers to enact the curriculum (e.g., National Action Civics Collaborative, 2012). To be sure, these latter programs teach students about the workings of the federalist system. However, these latter programs also focus more on engaging in civic action than on producing a whole-scale social studies curriculum with an action civics component. Indeed, these three programs in particular illustrate a range of approaches to teaching action civics.

While these programs certainly use differing approaches to civics, they interestingly share a process model for “doing civics.” Each of these action civics programs are comprised of six steps pulled from their online program descriptions: (1) community analysis, (2) issue selection, (3) issue research, (4) planning for action, (5) taking action, and (6) reflection (Fitzgerald, 2017). In these cases, the “knowledge base” is contextually bound to the issue selected by the class, providing a more authentic role for research, action, and civics education.

For its successes, this model has been hailed by educators, notably US Education Secretary Arne Duncan (2012), as a way to engage students in authentic civic practice. New research, however, suggests that while the process of civic action might be impactful, a pre-condition of wide and various relationships within the community might be key to authentic civic action. In a qualitative study of civic thinking, civic leaders relied on their existing, non-instrumental relationships to inform the process by which they will engage a community problem, if they engage it at all (Fitzgerald, 2016). This means that civic leaders have the contact information of a wide variety of people within their network who could help them to problem solve any of various civic issues via “networked publics” (Ito et al., 2009, pp. 18-21). While these networked publics may serve a similar purpose to Putnam’s voluntary associations, they are less formal and more “flat,” enabling those within the network to engage other members with a level of comfort that more hierarchical structures may not have allowed. As a network, there was little epistemic isolation, enabling various ideas to be explored and the community to decide if, when, and how they might respond. However, it is also possible that the network knowledge dimension may matter more than interpersonal relationships for community residents who are not civic leaders.

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Rationale for study

While it is important for students to meet and work with engaged adults as part of their democratic citizenship development, we do not know the extent to which typical community residents have relationships with or knowledge of civically engaged community members. Fitzgerald's (2016) conclusions from semi-structured qualitative interviews of civic leaders in Staten Island, NY, identified the following important characteristics: highly effective civic leaders can identify specific people by name, and have the contact information to be able to involve them in response to an issue of civic importance. Our study uses a new instrument to assess the extent to which adults who are not civic leaders have relationships that could be useful for civic action. We also measure perceptions of likelihood of individual and community civic action in response to four different scenarios. Without this information, it is difficult to discern the extent to which civics educators should be encouraged to facilitate strong ties between students and community members.

Methods

Study population

We studied a population-based random sample of adults living in two towns, Fos-sur-Mer and Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône, in the industrial zone of the Marseille metropolitan area (n=252). A systematic random sample of residents was conducted in-person from June through December, 2015; participants had the opportunity to complete the survey in person then, or on the phone or online later. Of the households sampled, 21.5% (including those who were not home when we sampled them) participated in our survey, and 30% of those surveyed completed this civic engagement instrument. In addition to our systematic random sample, since this was part of a larger community-based participatory research initiative, we also invited any interested residents to participate in the survey even if they had not been sampled; we refer to this as our volunteer sample (n=57). The Virginia Tech IRB reviewed our study protocol and approved the data collection described here.

During recent strikes regarding a proposed new labor law in France in summer, 2016, Fos-sur-Mer was one of the towns in which strikes were particularly visible; additionally, Fos-sur-Mer has a history of civic action on labor and union issues (Allen, Cohen, Ferrier, Lees, & Richards, 2016; Allen, Ferrier, & Cohen, 2017). This population is similar to that of Staten Island in terms of socioeconomic position and proximity to a major urban center (Marseille is the second largest

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city in France), so in addition to testing our questions, we were also curious whether the questions may be useful regardless of nationality.

Measures of interest

We developed a set of multiple-choice and short answer questions to measure the relational aspect of civic engagement. The set of questions asks the same set of questions in response to four different situations in which people might be interested in organizing to address a community issue. If any of the situations are currently happening in their community or have happened in the past, respondents may answer based on those experiences.

The four situations are (1) concern about crime, (2) a new industrial facility opening nearby, (3) a principal of the local school doing a poor job, and (4) a nearby facility emitting high levels of pollution. We chose these four scenarios since they are all relevant to many communities, and we were interested in whether people would respond similarly across all scenarios or differently for each. We asked two questions related to industry and environment, since these were instances that were ongoing and/or had happened in the recent past, to ensure that we would have some opportunities for people to rely on prior experience when answering.

Then, for each of the scenarios, survey participants answered how likely people in their community would organize to address the issue and how likely they themselves would organize to address the issue. If they responded that they were likely or very likely to organize, they were then asked whom in the community they would contact to plan next steps, how they would contact that person, and if they have that person's contact information. Descriptive statistics and regression coefficients were calculated in Stata 14.1.

Results

Random sample

Among our random sample, 54.8% were female, the mean and median age were 51 years (range: 18-93), 34.9% were employed full-time, 49.0% had received a baccalaureate degree or higher, and 43.6% made more than 23,000 euros per year. We also asked more typical measures of civic engagement. From those questions, this population was moderately civically engaged: 77.1% of respondents said that they would vote tomorrow if federal elections were being held, and 28.9% of respondents reported being a member of a local association (e.g., neighborhood association, issue-based non-profit).

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On average, people reported that their communities were more likely to organize to take action than they as individuals were (Table 1) (p-values from chi-square tests: p=0.16 for crime, p<0.0005 for new industrial facility, p<0.0005 for school, p<0.0005 for polluting facility). This was particularly true for scenarios in which people were likely reflecting on events of the recent past to inform their responses (i.e., the new industrial facility scenario). The schooling scenario and the pollution scenario appeared to be the most galvanizing for both individual respondents and their perceptions of the whole community.

Table 1. How likely respondents thought community members would organize and also how likely they themselves would organize, for random and volunteer samples

	Very likely	Likely	Unlikely	Very unlikely	Don't know
Crime					
Random sample (n=247)					
Community	12.2%	21.1%	18.6%	20.7%	26.3%
Respondents	7.8%	24.5%	12.2%	38.8%	15.5%
Volunteer sample (n=54)					
Community	3.7%	33.3%	31.5%	14.8%	14.8%
Respondents	5.6%	14.8%	33.3%	29.6%	11.1%
New industrial facility					
Random sample (n=247)					
Community	42.9%	26.7%	8.1%	6.1%	15.8%
Respondents	10.6%	25.3%	13.9%	38.0%	11.8%
Volunteer sample (n= 53)					
Community	28.3%	37.7%	11.3%	7.6%	15.1%
Respondents	1.9%	28.9%	32.7%	25.0%	7.7%
School					

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Random sample (n=242)					
Community	41.3%	31.4%	3.3%	7.4%	16.1%
Respondents	23.9%	29.3%	5.4%	32.2%	8.8%
Volunteer sample (n=52)					
Community	26.9%	38.5%	9.6%	1.9%	23.1%
Respondents	7.7%	32.7%	21.2%	19.2%	15.4%
High levels of pollution					
Random sample (n=243)					
Community	52.3%	23.1%	8.6%	9.1%	6.6%
Respondents	22.8%	23.2%	21.2%	25.3%	7.1%
Volunteer sample (n=51)					
Community	35.3%	49.0%	2.0%	5.9%	7.8%
Respondents	16.0%	30.0%	26.0%	16.0%	10.0%

We also looked at the proportion of respondents who reported that it would be very likely or likely (as opposed to unlikely or very unlikely) that their community or that they themselves would act for each of the four scenarios, stratified by age. For all four issues, the middle age group (age 36-64) had the highest proportion of respondents say that they as individuals would likely take action on that issue.

Table 2. Percent of respondents by age category who thought that it would be very likely or likely that their community or they as individuals would respond to take action on each issue.

	Age 18-35	Age 36-64	Age 65+
Crime			
Community	46%	56%	35%

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Individual	35%	49%	20%
New industrial facility			
Community	90%	83%	66%
Individual	32%	48%	34%
School			
Community	92%	85%	84%
Individual	76%	65%	27%
Pollution			
Community	65%	84%	92%
Individual	30%	59%	53%

If respondents reported that they were likely or very likely to take action on a given issue, we then asked a series of follow-up questions. We first asked people to identify the name and job title of the person whom they would contact to plan next steps. However, respondents typically reported positions or organizations and did not frequently use the name variable. Additionally, respondents sometimes identified multiple people, so the percentages do not necessarily add up to 100%.

Of the respondents for the crime scenario (n=82), 61% identified the police, 56% identified the mayor (by title rather than by name), 27% identified neighbors, friends or family, and the rest identified government in general, firefighters, the military, or said that they would work alone; only one respondent identified a person by name.

For the new industrial facility scenario, only two respondents identified someone by name, and everyone else reported job title only. Of the respondents for this scenario (n= 96), 64% identified the mayor, 35% identified local associations, 21% identified friends of neighbors, and the rest identified the new facility's leader, an internet activism community, a journalist, a scientific organization, local government, police, firefighters, or local businesses.

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For the school scenario, only one respondent named an individual. Of the respondents for this scenario (n= 90), 46% would contact the mayor, 39% would contact the principal, 23% would contact parents, 22% would contact the parents' association, 18% would contact the school, and 13% would contact the designated school inspector. The rest of the respondents identified a union, local associations, the federal education department, friends, neighbors, and family, police, unspecified government, teachers, and elected officials.

For the polluting facility scenario, two respondents identified someone by name. Of the randomly sampled respondents for this scenario (n=53), 57% identified the mayor, 2% identified the prior mayor, 36% identified local associations, 4% identified neighbors, 4% identified the facility director or representative, 2% identified the prefecture, 2% identified "numero vert," 2% identified colleagues, and 2% identified unions. (Percents add up to more than 100% since some identified more than one contact.)

For all four scenarios, the most commonly selected way to contact the person identified was in person (table 3). The highest proportion of respondents had contact information in the crime scenario, but this was likely because most respondents identified emergency services (i.e., police) as their contacts, as it is common for residents to memorize the three-digit emergency number (112 in France, equivalent to 911 in the United States).

Table 3. Contact method and contact information on hand, for the random sample

	Crime (n=103)	New industrial facility (n=110)	School (n=132)	High levels of pollution (n=147)
How respondent would contact the person they identified				
By phone	35.9%	10.9%	12.1%	15.0%
By e-mail	1.0%	9.1%	7.6%	4.1%
In person	48.5%	51.8%	57.6%	53.7%
By letter	5.8%	15.5%	9.1%	11.6%
Other	8.7%	12.7%	13.6%	15.7%

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Respondent has that person's contact information	83.5%	76.6%	68.2%	74.3%
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We were also interested in exploring the breadth of civic engagement reported: Did respondents tend to select specific areas to engage in, or were they engaged more generally? Of 315 randomly sampled respondents, 39.1% did not report being likely to organize for any of the four scenarios, 21.3% reported being likely to organize for just one, 18.7% for two, 14.6% for three, and only 6.4% for all four. We were interested in what might be associated with being more broadly civically engaged, so we examined the association between being a member of a local non-profit and the breadth of civic engagement. After adjusting for gender and self-reported likelihood of voting in an election, being a member of a non-profit was associated with an increase in the number of scenarios respondents reported being likely or very likely to organize to take action on (β : 0.43, 95% confidence interval (CI): 0.10-0.76). Age was also associated with the number of scenarios respondents reported being likely or very likely to organize to take action on (β : -0.01, 95% CI: -0.02-0.001); this means that a respondent 10 years older than another respondent on average participates in 0.1 fewer scenarios. There was no statistically significant association between being likely to vote in the next election and breadth of civic engagement (β : 0.03, 95% CI: -0.29-0.36).

Volunteer sample

We compared our findings from the random sample to the volunteer sample. We had hypothesized that volunteer participants would be more civically engaged, since they had taken an extra step to participate in the survey, and would have likely heard about the opportunity to participate in the survey through civic channels. The volunteer sample appeared to be slightly more engaged by traditional measures (80.7% said they would vote tomorrow if federal elections were held, and 36.8% were members of a local association), but these were not statistically significantly different from the random sample. Interestingly, when we examined how likely they thought their fellow community members and they themselves were to act (Table 1), the volunteer sample reported being less civically engaged than the random sample, and they also perceived their community to be less civically engaged.

Discussion

We were able to successfully operationalize the relational dimensions identified through qualitative interviews into short, mostly closed-ended questions. Based on these findings, most community residents were not able to provide much detail in terms of whom they would contact, but they did report knowing the contact information, suggesting that asking the question about contact information may not be as informative in identifying those more likely to take effective civic action.

We found it interesting that respondents on average reported that their community was more likely to be engaged on any given issue than they themselves were. This could be due to French inclinations away from acting upon individual interests (Lamont & Thevenot, 2000), and/or because this area has a history of political action on some topics (Allen, Ferrier, & Cohen, 2017), and so it will be interesting to test these survey questions in other geographic contexts as well. We also found it interesting that the volunteer sample was less civically engaged than the random sample. We encourage future researchers to assess if this phenomenon exists in other geographic settings and for other civic engagement measures. At least for our sample, this suggests that those most interested in participating in a survey may not necessarily be those who are most civically engaged.

We asked about four different scenarios, two of which were environmental issues that had happened in the past, and two (crime and education) which were more hypothetical and focused more on personnel. The scenario that respondents from our random sample were most interested in responding to was the education scenario, followed by the two environmental scenarios. The randomly sampled respondents thought that community members would be most likely to act on the two environmental scenarios, for which they may have drawn from what had occurred in these two towns previously. The volunteer sample was most inclined to respond to the two environmental scenarios; because the main focus of the study was on environmental and health topics, it makes sense that those who volunteered to participate may be particularly inclined towards environmental activism.

That even those participants who express an inclination towards engagement (a prerequisite for being asked the relational questions) were unable to name specific names of contacts other than those of general political figures suggests that these participants want to engage in important civic issues but lack specific community resources (or an ability to access those that are available), unlike the civic leaders in the original Staten Island study. Thus, civics educators might explore

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ways in which participation opportunities could be created within the community by providing accessible networks of people to lead civic efforts.

The relationships that build and sustain community networks can be both instrumental and non-instrumental. However, for the purposes of civics education, curricular models need to selectively support students as they develop instrumental, community-active relationships. Such student-developed relationships can only be fostered via student-centered, professionally mentored experiences, such as the ones that action civics curricula offer (Fitzgerald & Andes, 2012). Such an educational context enables students to be cognitively apprenticed (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1988) in the processes and methods of civic engagement while attending to the ethical and practical issues of civics instruction in school settings (Fitzgerald & Andes, 2012).

Implications

These findings suggest that civic education must engage students in developing their own civic relationships. Highly engaged adults demonstrate access to wide networks of diverse individuals, many from their own community; they are able to draw upon such networks when they need to act in the civic sphere (Fitzgerald, 2016). This study illustrates that engaged adults who want to participate in the civic sphere rely on a handful of community actors with whom they have little personal connection in order to engage in action. In some cases, such reliance may work; however, it is not what highly engaged civic individuals do. Highly engaged civic individuals foster broad network relationships, which they can call upon when civic action is required; as relationships, the individuals involved have personal connections to each other.

While action civics models have demonstrated a better ability to support students in “doing civics” over traditional civics classes (Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016; Cipparone & Cohen, 2015), this study suggests that the mentors leading such instruction should provide students with the means and capacities to access and build civic networks. For example, action civics mentors could enable students to research key community figures related to a selected issue and enable them to contact such decision makers. Mentorship in such communication skills could be valuable for a variety of purposes and enable students to develop a personalized network under supervision.

In addition, action civics mentors need to familiarize themselves with various community decision makers. As this study demonstrates, adults need to develop their networks as well. This means that mentors should personally meet with community leaders, forging civic and educational relationships that would make instructing students on the process more effective.

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Still, more research is needed to explore the ways in which such networks can be developed through action civics instruction. To date, few studies have explored the ways that highly engaged civic actors develop their own networks in the mobile technology society. Additionally, few studies have explored the ways in which students create networks as part of a mentored experience. These relationships may develop through the process of expert development, as Ito and her colleagues (2009) describe or through some other process. Exploring this relational aspect of civic engagement, though, seems important based on this study's findings.

Conclusion

While initial findings from action civics curriculum implementation have been positive, the field is continuing to try to hew such work more closely with what "civic experts" do. This study demonstrates that adults who want to be civically engaged ("non-experts") perceive their neighbors to be, on average, more engaged than they perceive to be themselves, and that few individuals can provide specific action steps for how they would tackle social issues in their community. These findings suggest that action civics curricula should engage students in relationship building, enabling them to construct instrumental, personal civic networks that they can draw upon later as adults to deepen their community engagement and, hopefully, increase their success for civic change.

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Acknowledgements: Barbara Allen and Parissa Ballard provided useful comments, and Travis Richards, Johanna Lees, and Yolaine Ferrier helped prepare the data for analyses. This work was supported by a grant from the *Agence Nationale de Sécurité Sanitaire de l'alimentation, de l'environnement et du travail* (ANSES), the French agency for food, environment, and occupational health and safety. (Award number: PNREST Anses, Cancer ITMO AVIESAN, 2014/1/023)

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<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585
