

**Social Capital and Civic Engagement:
The Role of Community Level Variables in Fostering Civic Engagement in
Communities**

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Abstract:

In 2005, the Gallup Organization conducted a national study of residents across 21 large metropolitan cities. The goal of the study was to identify a city's strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of its residents. The topics under investigation included basic service offerings, community leadership, local economy, safety, lifestyle offerings, tolerance, and many other factors. In our analysis we will examine the correlates of residential engagement. We examine which factors lead residents to be active in the betterment of their communities through social and political engagement. If successful urban renewal necessitates significant bottom up residential participation, then which factors motivate individuals to be active in their communities? We theorize that community level variables such as social and basic offerings are a key factor in explaining civic engagement.

Paper Prepared for the 38th annual meeting of the Urban Affairs Association, Baltimore, MD, 2008.

Introduction:

In recent years a considerable amount of scholarly attention has been given to the observed decrease in social capital, or civic engagement in the United States. Since Robert Putnam's initial observations of the phenomena in the mid 1990's, a wave of subsequent research has attempted to understand the factors that lead to the development and decline of civic engagement. Explanations for the phenomenon of civic engagement have employed a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches from psychological and economic accounts relying on quantitative methodologies to sociological explanations utilizing qualitative methodologies. Examining this literature, we find that current explanations have failed to examine an important variable which is residential satisfaction, which is a key variable of community engagement highlighted in much of the urban development research on residential satisfaction and community development. Incorporating these insights with current theoretical accounts of civic engagement, we seek to examine the effects of residential satisfaction on civic engagement and discuss its implications for current research. We hypothesize that residential satisfaction with community offerings is positively related to civic engagement. We test this theory with an ordinal logit analysis of a recent Gallup panel survey of 21 American cities. The paper will proceed as follows. First we offer a brief discussion of social capital and the current research on its causes. Second, we examine urban development research on residential satisfaction. Incorporating those insights into existing theory, we develop a series of hypotheses. Third, we test our hypotheses and present the results of our statistical models. And lastly, we discuss the implications of our findings for both the scholarship on civic engagement and the policy makers.

The Decline of Social Capital and Civic Engagement in the United States:

The term social capital is a concept that has been widely used in an array of academic disciplines such as business, economics, political science, public administration, criminology, and sociology. In its broadest definition, social capital refers to connections within and between social networks that communities can use to manage and allocate resources (Bourdieu 1986). While the concept itself is highly contested, scholars tend to agree that such networks have intrinsic value as they can serve to increase both the productivity and utility of individuals and groups (Portes 1998). At the core of this view is the notion that social networks are necessary in the midst of modernization in that they provide a way for individuals and groups to obtain their interests in a world that has become increasingly bureaucratized and globalized (Granovetter 1983).

Within the field of political science the concept of social capital has been closely tied to the study of civil society, which scholars define as voluntary associations and organizations that function outside the market and state (Cohen and Arato 1992; Walzer 1992). This definition builds upon the notion of the “third sector,” which is comprised of formal and informal groups of people acting voluntarily and without seeking personal profit to obtain benefits for both themselves and others (Lyons 2001). Scholars contend that it is through these civil society/third sector mechanisms that individuals are able to establish and maintain relational networks in the midst of modernization and post-modernization (Cohen and Arato 1992; Foley and Edwards 1999; Walters 2002; Hooghe and Stolle 2003). Furthermore, voluntary networks also serve the purpose of connecting people with each other, which can lead to a loose form of political organization. Hence, these informal and loosely structured organizations can help to build trust and reciprocity within societies that can foster a collective sense of altruism without obligation. Thus, it is held that such relational networks constitute the sources of social capital that leads to

the development of civil society, the centerpiece of which is civic engagement (Bolin, Lindgren et al. 2003).

However, an interesting paradox exists in that while the creation of voluntary associations (i.e. social capital) can ultimately serve to help make the lives of individuals and society better there has been an observed decrease in social capital in the past few decades. In *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*, Putnam examines the decline of social capital in the U.S. since 1950 (Putnam 2000). Putnam contends that this lack of social capital undermines the active civic engagement that a democracy requires from its citizens and discusses the ways in which Americans have disengaged from political involvement including decreased voter turnout, public meeting attendance, serving on committees, and working with political parties. Additionally, Putnam also notes Americans' growing distrust of government. While he accepts that this lack of political trust may be a product of the various political scandals that have occurred since the 1960's, Putnam argues that this explanation is limited when viewing it alongside other trends in civic engagement such as an overall decrease of sociality among Americans, hence the idea of people choosing to bowl alone instead of joining leagues (2000). Putnam contends that the decline in civic engagement is not a product of changing demographics or social norms, but rather he contends that the primary cause of the problem is the increasing individualization of our leisure time via technological advances such as television, the Internet, and video games (Putnam 2001).

The Causes of Civic Engagement:

Putnam's initial observations and lamentations concerning the decline of social capital in the U.S prompted scholars to further investigate the phenomenon of civic engagement and the factors that affect it. The research on civic engagement and its causes can be divided into two

broad categories based on levels of analysis they focus on. The first category includes individual level explanations, which places emphasis on the role that elites play in developing the social networks that foster civic engagement and the individual level factors that prompt people to join social networks. The second category is comprised of structural level explanations that place emphasis on macro structures such as societal values and norms.

Scholars adopting an individual level approach contend that societal-level social capital ultimately rests upon individual attitudes and behaviors. Focusing on the individual and social psychological factors affecting civic engagement, these scholars seek to examine the difference between real versus “ersatz” social activities, the latter being social activities that are substitutes for true social interaction such as interactions with the media or media characters rather than other individuals (Green and Brock 1998; Green, Strange et al. 2002; Schank, Berman et al. 2002). The main explanation offered by scholars of this approach is that the decline in social capital is a result in a decrease in individuals’ political trust. For example, one set of studies found that individuals with low political trust were more susceptible to situational influences, where they chose more real social activities when in a positive mood or when benefits of friendship were salient while choosing ersatz social activities when in a bad mood or when costs of friendship were salient. Conversely, high-trust individuals showed relatively high preference for real social interactions regardless of mood or the salience of costs and benefits (Green and Brock 1998; Slater, Brock et al. 2002). This finding has been supported by other studies which have shown the connection between civic engagement, political trust, and other variables such as overall life satisfaction and material variables such as economic standing (Brehm and Rahn 1997). Additionally, research has also shown that social trust and civic engagement are the products of psychological factors such as ethnocentrism and group threat. In regards to

ethnocentrism, studies have shown that civic networks comprised of only in-group members are more cohesive and function more efficiently than networks comprised of both in and out-group members (Stolle 1998; Buchan and Croson 2004; Tajfel and Turner 2004) These findings are also supported by the research done on group threat where group tensions cause respective in-groups to form strong social networks while facilitating distrust between groups which impedes any sense of civic engagement across the larger community (Bobo 1988).

While the social psychological research on civic engagement is empirically rich, it is problematic for two reasons. First, scholars do not address the factors that prompt some individuals to have more political trust than others. Secondly, the studies emphasizing ethnocentrism and group threat do not reconcile their findings with those advanced by research examining the contact hypothesis where increased interaction between individuals and groups can lead to greater harmony and civic engagement (Gaertner, Rust et al. 1994; Gaertner, Dovidio et al. 1996).

Answers to such questions have been addressed by scholars employing an economic approach. For these scholars, socioeconomic variables are the primary determinant of individuals' level of civic engagement (Antoci, Sacco et al. 2001; Ferreira 2002; Costa and Kahn 2004). The argument advanced by the socioeconomic approach is that poorer groups have less social capital because of factors such as lack of education, social mobility, and the simple fact that they are too preoccupied with their own economic survival (Whiteley 2000; Collier 2002; Knack 2002). Additionally, they contend that economic disparity between groups prompts individuals to be less trusting of both other groups and the larger political system (Glaeser, Laibson et al. 2000; Zak and Knack 2001). Hence, these finding suggest that economic inequality and disparity are the primary culprits behind the decrease in civic engagement within

the U.S (Zak and Knack 2001; Alesina and La Ferrara 2002). However, a problem with arguments centering on socioeconomic factors is that they often attribute individual and group level responses to economic factors as being a rational calculation, hence they advance the hypothesis that people only participate in civic engagement when there is a payoff of some kind (Knack and Keefer 2003). This is problematic in that experimental economics has shown that economic disparity and severe poverty often leads individuals to act irrationally (Frey and Eichenberger 1991; Ultee 2002).

While the aforementioned research has demonstrated that psychological and economic variables have an effect on whether people become civically engaged, sub-body of research utilizing the individual level of analysis attempts to factor the role that elites play in shaping individual attitudes. This research suggests that politically relevant social capital (that is, social capital that facilitates political engagement) is generated by elite led personal networks where interaction with well informed elites increases citizens' levels of civic engagement. Thus, the production of politically relevant social capital is a function of the political expertise of elites within an individual's network of relations, the frequency of political interaction within the network, and the size or extensiveness of the network (Scheufele and Shah 2000). One study in particular finds that this process is sustained even when controlling for individual characteristics and organizational involvement (Lake and Huckfeldt 1998). Hence, the consequences of social relations within networks are not readily explained away on the basis of either human capital effects or the effects of organizational engagement.

A more cutting edge approach to the elite based argument is communication infrastructure theory (CIT). An ecological approach to communication and community, CIT claims that access to storytelling community resources is a critical factor in civic engagement

(Gibbs, Ball-Rokeach et al. 2004). The theory holds that neighborhood environments where key community storytellers play an active role in encouraging residents to talk about the neighborhood are more likely to prompt individual residents to participate in civic actions and have a strong sense of collective efficacy (Ball-Rokeach et al. 2004). In this theory, elites are storytellers in the sense that they are able to frame their arguments in a way that speaks to the social and economic grievances of the larger community. While elite based research has stressed the sociological impact of interpersonal networks and the intersubjective meanings they can produce, a primary problem with this of research is that it does not properly address the question of why individual followers choose to accept elite narratives.

Taking a more holistic approach to the study of civic engagement are scholars employing structural or macro level analysis that focuses on the impact of broad social and material structures. The leader of this approach is Putnam who emphasizes the role that technological changes such as the advent of television and internet have played in making individuals less politically engaged (2001). Putnam's initial hypothesis has been confirmed in subsequent studies which have shown a strong correlation between political apathy and television watching (Shah 1998; Holbert, Kwak et al. 2003; Uslaner 2004). Additionally, research has also supported Putnam's secondary hypothesis that education also plays a prominent role in shaping individuals' sense of civic engagement (Dudley and Gitelson 2002; Torney-Purta 2002).

Offering an alternative explanation to Putman's technologically based theory. One study suggests that the impacts of structural economic transformations, in particular, the destabilization of communities that results when corporate ownership is disconnected from the community have been unfairly dismissed by Putnam in his determination to link the decline of social capital to television and generational effects (Heying 1995). This line of research contends that the

decrease in civic engagement is logically connected to corporate delocalization and decreasing incentives for elites to mobilize communities to enhance place-based development (Warren, Thompson et al. 1999). Thus, the diffusion of television and internet nationwide mergers in the banking and utility industries are likely to lead to a further deterioration of elite commitment to civic participation. It is also suggested that elite withdrawal will have cascading consequences on the philanthropic sector and the community's ability to sustain a dynamic associational life (Heying 1995).

Another popular argument is the notion that the steady decrease in civic engagement is a product of changes in class structures. This argument is advanced by Skocpol and Fiorina who note that while human and civil rights advocacy has helped to make society more inclusive along racial and gender lines, the organizations that promote these causes are oligarchic and not answerable to a mass membership base (1999). Their argument is that the development and diffusion of such networks has changed the way that civic politics are played, contending that advocacy organizations have their own dynamic. Utilizing resources like the mass media to get their message across, Skocpol and Fiorina argue that advocacy networks search for the “drama and controversy” they need to sustain themselves-impels them toward narrow stances and “polarized positions.” Therefore, in a civic life dominated by staff-led advocacy, ordinary people have little voice. Instead, under this “reconfigured class structure” the managerial and professional stratum occupies key positions. This new class has become more numerous in recent years and now makes up a comfortable and privileged segment of society, comprised of busy professionals who are choosy individualists, in addition to a wide variety of staff-led advocacy groups. The power of this new class lies in their ability to pick and choose causes and contribute money without engaging in time-consuming forms of cross-class interaction (Skocpol

and Fiorina 1999). As a result of this dynamic, activists are disconnected from the masses and do not know very much about how others live.

Conversely, another strand of structural level research contends that societal level attributes within states are the most determining factors affecting civic engagement. This research contends that corporate/statist societies have less civic engagement than non-corporate societies. The reason for this outcome is the fact that in corporate societies civic organizations and interests are usually included in the state governing apparatus, whereas in non-corporate societies civic engagement at the mass level will be higher in that people need to create civic networks in order to have a forum to express interests (Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001; Smith and Shen 2002). Also taking a societal approach, one set of studies contend that societal level social values have an impact on civic engagement such as whether the society has a history of democratic values (Curtis, Grabb et al. 1992; Curtis, Baer et al. 2001; Eckstein 2001). Interestingly, one study in particular found that demographically Christian societies have higher levels of civic engagement than those dominated by other religious groups (Curtis, Baer et al. 2001).

While these structural and state level explanations are compelling, they are not without their problems. First, there is an empirical gap in that by focusing on the level of societal norms, structural level accounts do not convincingly demonstrate whether the processes they postulate actually affect mass level behavior. Secondly, for those scholars advancing a materialist argument that emphasizes factors such as economic and technological changes and innovations, they do not account for how such material changes prompt changes in societal level norms and attitudes. This is a result of the fact that structural level accounts give little attention to the mass

level. Thus, these accounts provide little or no empirical evidence as what the masses actually believe in addition to how they respond to structural level forces.

Civic Engagement and Residential Satisfaction:

While the current research on civic engagement and social capital has yielded a number of interesting and scientifically valid findings, we contend that there is more to the picture than current research has suggested and posit that civic engagement is a product of community level factors such as whether people are happy with the place they live and what it has to offer them. Our starting point for this theory is the assumption that individuals are primarily concerned with and influenced by their “local worlds,” or their immediate physical and social surroundings (Stairs 1992; Shotter 1997; Duhl 2002). Additionally, we also build upon the work of Brehm and Rahn’s research which suggests that civic engagement is a product of individuals overall life satisfaction (1997). However, unlike Brehm and Rahn who treat life satisfaction as a secondary variable of important, we contend that life satisfaction is closely correlated to community level factors such as basic service offerings (e.g., having good schools, public transportation, and health care services) and lifestyle amenities (e.g., cultural diversity, vibrant night life, and outdoor settings for families to have fun). Building upon research findings in residential satisfaction, we argue that people who are less content with their communities are more likely to become civically engaged.

While the early research on residential satisfaction focused on the role of satisfaction as a catalyst for leaving or staying in an area (Speare 1974; Michelson 1977; Stapleton 1980; Galster and Hesser 1981; Vrbka and Combs 1993; Barcus 2004; Flowerdew 2004), more recent research has begun to examine how social amenity and neighborhood infrastructure variables affect social capital (Temkin and Rohe 1998; Jarrett 2000; Seguin and Germain 2000). For example Seguin

and Germain (2000) found that neighborhoods with better social amenities or places facilitating community interaction prompted higher levels of tolerance and participation in multiethnic neighborhoods. These findings were also supported in other research studies which demonstrated that places with better social amenities had less instances of intergroup conflict and a higher levels of participation by residents (Goudy 1977; Francescato, Weidemann et al. 1987; Howarth 2001; Potter and Cantarero 2006).

Based on these findings we contend that individuals in communities with better jobs, educational opportunities, health care, and other basic service offerings, as well as lifestyle amenities will be more civically engaged because they will have a stronger sense of attachment and investment to the community. Studies on residential satisfaction have suggested that individuals who like the places they live are more likely to have an increased sense of self-esteem and well-being (Seguin and Germain 2000; Cummins and Nistico 2002). These findings coincide with more general findings in psychology which suggest that having a high sense of self-esteem will increase the likelihood of cooperation and engagement with others (Mecca, Smelser et al. 1989; Vohs and Heatherton 2001; Lerner 2004). Based on the insights derived from these research findings we develop the following hypotheses:

H₁ The more social offerings a community has the higher its level of civic engagement will be

H₂ The more basic service offerings a community has the higher its level of civic engagement will be

H₃ The more educational offerings a community has the higher its level of civic engagement will be

Data:

The data used in this study is from Gallup's 2005 Glocal Panel Survey, which uses a random sample of 3,213 residents in 21 major U.S. cities. This also includes a sample of 821

residents from Washington D.C., Baltimore, and Omaha, which were each over-sampled for regional comparison purposes. The cities were chosen to reflect a sampling of large and medium-sized cities across the U.S. and are not meant to represent the entire set of US cities. The data were collected by Gallup from May to June 2005 and were weighted to reflect Census Bureau estimates for each city sampled (total weighted N=2,962). Similar to other studies focusing on cities, the suburban residents were removed from the sample bringing the sample size to 2,307 (both weighted and unweighed).

Dependent Variable:

Our main dependent variable of interest is “civic engagement.” We conceptualize engagement as the extent to which an individual participates politically in their community through contact with politicians and petitioning. Our civic engagement variable is a composite measure that combines two questionnaire items determining the extent to which respondents contact politicians and engage in petitioning (see Appendix 1). A principle components analysis of our dependent variable revealed a single factor with strong reliability ($\alpha=.624$; Principal Components Factor variance explained = 72.981%). The frequencies for our civic engagement variable are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Civic Engagement

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	908	39.7	39.7
	2.00	637	27.9	67.5
	3.00	487	21.3	88.8
	4.00	188	8.2	97.0
	5.00	68	3.0	100.0
	Total	2288	100.0	
Missing	System	19		
Total		2307		

Independent Variables:

Our first independent variable is “social offerings,” which is a composite measure combining responses to questions such as whether respondents thought their community was a good place to meet people, whether it has places to facilitate such interactions. Additionally, the measure also contains respondents’ evaluation a number of factors related to the aesthetics of the community, its cultural offerings, and its nightlife. Each set of questions was evaluated on a 5-point scale with 1 indicating “very bad” and 5 indicating “very good” (see Appendix 1). A principle components analysis of this variable revealed a single factor with strong reliability ($\alpha=.720$; Principal Components Factor variance explained = 47.58%).

Our second independent variable is “basic needs.” Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which believed that their community has such things affordable housing, good public transportation, quality health care, low traffic, and the availability of religious institutions. Each set of questions was evaluated on a 5-point scale with 1 indicating “very bad” and 5 indicating “very good.” Our measure of basic offerings is the average of the eight items. The basic offerings measure resulted in two factors, one tapping individual socio-economic service offerings (e.g., education, jobs, health care, public transportation), and the other tapping structural offerings (e.g., low traffic, housing costs). All six items were combined on the grounds they represent a second order factor with strong internal consistency. ($\alpha=.727$; Principal Components Factor variance explained = 42.497%).

Our third independent variable “educational offerings” gauges respondents’ opinion of the quality of their community’s public high schools and universities in their city evaluated on a 5-point scale with 1 indicating “very bad” and 5 indicating “very good” (see Appendix 1). These 2 items were combined into a single composite measure with a principle components

analysis of this variable revealing a single factor with strong reliability ($\alpha=.6724$; Principal Components Factor variance explained = 64.724%).

Finally, we also included a number of demographic variables to act as statistical controls in the analysis. First, we used the dummy variables “sex” (1=male, 0=female) and “racial-ethnic minority status” (1=minority, 0=non-minority) are both self-reported. We also included Age, which is a four point ordinal measure is measure and “education” which is also a 4 point ordinal measure with 1=Less than High School, 2=High School Graduate, 3=Some College/Technical, 4= College degree and higher. And lastly, we included “income” which is measured as a 5 point ordinal scale with 1=less than \$30k, 2= \$30k to less than \$40k, 3= \$40k to less than \$50k, 4=\$50k to less than \$75k, and 5 = over \$75k (See Appendix 1).

Methods:

We utilized an ordinal logit regression model because our dependent variable is an ordinal scale measure ranging from 2 to 6. We formulated a restricted equation which included control variables drawn out from the existing literature. These included demographic and socioeconomic variables of age, income, education, gender, and minority status. In our second unrestricted equation we included our social offerings, basic needs and educational offerings variables in order to test or hypothesis regarding civic engagement.

Results:

In the restricted model all of the variables were statistically significant at the .05 level and the overall model had a pseudo R^2 of .17. Being a minority we would expect a .511 decrease in the log odds of civic engagement, holding all other variables in the model are held constant. Similarly as income increases the log odds of civic engagement are negative. The findings suggest that women, wealthier people, those with higher levels of education, and people who are

older are more likely to be civically engaged. On the other hand, men, people who are less educated, and younger people are likely to be less civically engaged. Hence, our expected results for this model support previous research in that there are statistically significant positive relationships between civic engagement and the independent variables for age, education, and income. The results for this first model are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2: Restricted Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	[CivicEngage_Scale = 2.00]	-1.757	.228	.000	-2.203	-1.311
	[CivicEngage_Scale = 3.00]	-.373	.203	.066	-.771	.025
	[CivicEngage_Scale = 4.00]	1.100	.201	.000	.706	1.494
	[CivicEngage_Scale = 5.00]	2.446	.207	.000	2.040	2.852
Location	Minority	-.511	.088	.000	-.684	-.338
	income5	.211	.029	.000	.154	.268
	Male	-.193	.085	.023	-.359	-.027
	agecat6	.154	.027	.000	.101	.208
	educ4	.413	.052	.000	.311	.515

Cox and Snell R-Square = 0.144, $P < .05$

In our unrestricted model we included our three variables for basic offerings, educational offerings, and social offerings. All three variables were statistically significant at the .05 level. Additionally, the pseudo R^2 increased to .17. However, contrary to our hypotheses we found that only our social offering scale was positive. This finding seems to support hypothesis presented in most residential satisfaction research in that individuals will be more civically engaged when they live in places that have more high quality social environments in which to interact with their neighbors. Furthermore, the findings for the educational offerings and basic needs variables suggest that individuals are engage in civic activity as they see problems arise in their

communities, which refute the conventional wisdom that socioeconomic factors have a negative effect on civic engagement. Thus in communities where basic needs are not being met and educational offerings are not meeting expectations individuals are likely mobilize and become politically active. The results for the second model are presented below in Table 3.

Table 3: Unrestricted Parameter Estimates

		Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	[CivicEngage_Scale = 2.00]	-1.991	.367	.000	-2.712	-1.271
	[CivicEngage_Scale = 3.00]	-.629	.352	.074	-1.319	.061
	[CivicEngage_Scale = 4.00]	.807	.350	.021	.122	1.493
	[CivicEngage_Scale = 5.00]	2.236	.354	.000	1.543	2.929
Location	Minority	-.470	.096	.000	-.657	-.282
	income5	.211	.031	.000	.149	.272
	Male	-.171	.092	.064	-.351	.010
	agecat6	.195	.031	.000	.135	.255
	educ4	.370	.057	.000	.259	.481
	SocialOffer_Scale	.072	.017	.000	.039	.104
	BasicNeeds_Scale	-.037	.013	.004	-.062	-.012
	EducationalOffer_Scale	-.139	.034	.000	-.206	-.073

Cox and Snell R-Square = 0.170, $P < .05$

Conclusion:

This study produced mixed results and further research is necessary to further understand how educational offerings, basic needs and social offerings affect civic engagement. Our results do demonstrate that the literature maybe inadequate in understanding what triggers civic engagement. Holding all other variables equal it does seem that individuals to respond to perceived deficiencies in educational and other offerings. The question then becomes for policy makers is how do increase civic engagement in populations that according to our analysis are less likely to engage with the political process even if they find that their communities offerings

are lacking. Within the scope of this study these populations would be poor young male minorities with low education. Such a finding is not surprising given existing literature. However, encouraging disengaged populations to become engaged may produce results in increases the quality of public offerings. One way to do this would be to try to improve the quality of social offerings tailored to disengaged populations and then utilize these social offerings to promote engagement in the political process.

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