

How to Define Civic Engagement

Why do we need definitions?

Civic engagement is all the rage. Deans, provosts, presidents, and grant makers all love it. However, the discussion of civic engagement can get confusing with such terms as "civic engagement," "political engagement," "engagement," "service-learning," and "public service" used interchangeably. This confusion impedes research; it is hard to study the comparative effectiveness of different techniques if we don't have names that distinguish one technique from another.

Definitions, in order of increasing specificity

Engagement - sometimes *student engagement* or *academic engagement*.

Doing the reading, talking to professors outside of class, caring about the subject matter. Engagement in this sense does not necessarily imply caring about the wider world, or anything beyond the subject being studied.

Civic engagement

Participating in and seeking to influence the life of the community, where the community can be at any scale, from neighborhood to world. Civic engagement can be political, but it need not be. For example, students may turn out to clean a beach or a river bank on a community service day; this will improve the life of a community, but will not change a policy or call for state action.

Political engagement

Participating in activities that seek to have a direct impact on the state. What we really want to say here is that civic engagement need not be political, but political engagement is - but that's circular. Circularity is tempting, because it lets us finesse the definition of 'political' - some would limit politics to state activity, while others want to use it for anything that affects the allocation of values. In this case, though, we are trying to distinguish those who will vote, join campaigns, and attempt to influence elected officials from those who direct their engagement toward public education and voluntarism.

By this definition, a student who comes out of college with an increased commitment to improving the community, or helping the poor, or promoting the arts, can be said to have increased his or her civic engagement. Such engagement might lead to efforts to change public opinion, to motivate changes in individual behavior, or to start or support a business or a nonprofit organization; but only if that student also cares about affecting state action would we call it political engagement.¹

1. There is a danger of ideological bias here, so I want to point out that "political engagement" could also include a commitment to keeping the state *out* of some area of left. For example, Charles Murray argued for less state provision of basic welfare, but his position nevertheless *affected* state action, and so was political. See Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic, 1984),

Degrees of political engagement

Some political engagement programs judge their success by their effect on the probability of voting in elections, while others seek to develop leaders with a full-time commitment to politics. I suggest that, as political scientists in academic settings, we seek three degrees of political engagement, on a spectrum running from broad but shallow to narrow but intense:

1. *Voting.* We want all the students at our institutions who are eligible to vote to do so, and to continue voting for the rest of their lives.
2. *Attentiveness.* We hope that students who take any political science course will pay attention to, understand, and care about politics more than they did before.
3. *Leadership.* We hope that political science majors will be active political leaders, either as volunteers or through careers in public affairs.

Purposes of civic and political engagement

Political engagement is a good thing. We need it for healthy democracy, and given that universities are able to promote it, they ought to do so. As political scientists most of us are likely to think that political engagement is a worthy end for its own sake. At the same time we need to recognize that people and institutions have other motivations for engaging in the activities that increase political engagement. Two of these ends are particularly important for universities.

Retention. Many of us have sold service-learning or internship programs to our administrations by arguing that they will increase retention. This is particularly important for private tuition-funded institutions such as mine, but even large public universities are evaluated by their retention rates. Most of the activities that increase political engagement also increase retention – but what if they do not? While one could imagine a student becoming so concerned with public affairs that he or she drops out of school to work on a campaign, join a tent encampment, or otherwise devote himself or herself more immediately to social change, this does not seem to be a big problem. A larger problem, perhaps, is that programs designed to increase political engagement are not the *only* way to increase retention, and may prove less effective than some others. It is important, then, to advocate for political engagement as an end in itself, not only as a way to increase retention.

Learning. The relationship between political engagement and student *learning* is more complex. Mostly they reinforce each other. Learning about the political system and how to influence it is likely to make students more engaged with it, and being more engaged with politics will provide students more motivation to learn.² However, there are pitfalls here. An important body of literature argues that participation is not rational for many people, perhaps

2. At least one major introductory textbook is based on this relationship; see Daniel M. Shea and et al., *Living Democracy* (Boston: Longman, 2011).

for most.³ Another school maintains that democracy functions better if the masses of people do not participate too much.⁴ There is a minor risk that teaching this material will undermine political engagement, and a much greater risk that fear of undermining political engagement will deter us from teaching these important points of view.

Methods of teaching civic and political engagement

Sometimes civic and political engagement are equated with service-learning. This is problematic, for two reasons. First, it blinds us to the possibility of other ways that might work to increase political engagement; and second, it tempts us to expand our definition of service-learning so that it will cover everything. Several methods can be identified.

Service-learning. As strictly defined, service-learning must be part of an academic course, and contribute to the learning in that course; it must involve a community partner, and be responsive to that partner's needs; and it must contribute to social justice, broadly defined. If a university mobilizes students to clean up the area around campus on a weekend or if students volunteer at a community agency on their own, these are certainly community service, and they may increase civic or political engagement, but they are not service-learning.

Volunteer political activity. It may increase political engagement if students actually engage in politics, by volunteering with a political campaign, the office of an elected official, an interest group, or even a lobbying firm. None of these would fit a strict definition of service-learning, and even the loosest definition would probably not cover the student's lobbying for a corporate interest group; however, it seems very likely that such an experience could increase a student's political engagement. Of course, political activity might decrease political engagement instead; it is easy to imagine a student who did not like politics in the first place concluding from such an experience that it was too corrupt and shallow to be worthwhile.

Political internships. Many of the activities listed above could also be done as academic-credit internships. "Internship" is defined even more loosely than "service-learning," and many programs called internships are really exploitative of free labor. For our purposes, an internship is an academic enterprise: a work experience, supervised by a faculty member, that provides the student with a significant opportunity to both apply and deepen academic knowledge and includes a reflective component (typically a journal and/or a self-evaluation of learning). A good

3. Most famously, of course, Mancur Olson, Jr., *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

4. See, e.g., Samuel P. Huntington, "The Democratic Distemper," *The Public Interest*, no. 41 (Fall 1975): 9-38; Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, Triangle Papers (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

internship can develop future political leaders, the highest form of political engagement.

Classroom learning. The components of political engagement include motivation to improve the world, a belief that politics matters, and a belief that one can make a difference personally; but they also include some knowledge of how the political system works. For example, at the lowest level, voting requires knowledge of the location of the polling place and the date of the election. At higher levels, political engagement might include knowing who one's elected representatives are and what are the jurisdictions of state and federal government, and of legislative and executive branches. We teach all these things in the classroom, so it is reasonable to expect that our classroom teaching might increase political engagement as well.

Research needed

The definitions and discussion above are full of hypotheses, signaled by such words as "might" and "could." To improve our understanding of how to teach civic and political engagement, research is needed. Which kinds of programs are best for accomplishing which ends? Some work has been done on these questions - the bibliography provides some examples - but there is much more to be done. It is hoped that the conceptual clarification offered here will help improve the focus of such research.

Further Reading

Barber, Benjamin R., and Richard M. Battistoni, eds. *Education for Democracy: Citizenship, Community, Service: A Sourcebook for Students and Teachers*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co, 1993.

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