



Varieties of Civic Engagement in Contemporary America

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Educators and political leaders exhort Americans to be more civically engaged. Across the country, high schools require community “service learning” projects in the hope that students will pick up good habits. Local newscasts regularly tell people how they can “make a difference” by volunteering – joining walks to end hunger, tutoring a child, or re-painting an elderly person’s home for free. Civic action seems to be accomplished outside of the constraints – and bad influences – of money and bureaucracy, a matter of volunteering a few hours a week serving others; and it is portrayed as a sure-fire way to weave connections and trusting ties among otherwise atomized citizens. But my co-author and I have reviewed many studies and done our own close-up research on housing advocacy, youth service networks, and a variety of other civic undertakings. We find the standard images to be quite misleading.

Forms of Civic Action

At its core, civic action means ordinary citizens working together to address public problems and help determine the fortunes of communities, nation, and the world. Yet in our time, “improving” can mean vastly different things – and the activities used to improve society vary considerably.

- Consider a parent club that raises money to fund after-school programs for disadvantaged kids, a protest vigil outside a clinic that provides abortions, or a citizen’s task force on toxic waste disposal. All involve citizens who volunteer for a shared project.
- But consider, also, housing professionals who devise complicated plans to develop affordable apartments that rent at below-market rates. They, too, aim to improve society.

As these examples show, participatory collective efforts to improve society may be more or less professionalized, paid or done for free, informally or bureaucratically organized.

Not Always Separate from Government

Americans often draw sharp boundaries between citizen endeavors and what government bureaucrats do – but in practice the lines are blurred, the activities usually intertwined.

- Non-profit housing developers carry out a civic mission when they develop homes for low-income people. Government agencies contract to provide the money for the housing and, in return, the developers accept responsibility to carry out public mandates by adhering to equal housing laws and requiring tenants to open their homes to annual inspections on behalf of the taxpayers whose money helped build the apartments. The nonprofit developers act, at once, as civic actors and as representatives of government authority.
- Former President George W. Bush’s “faith-based” program encouraged religious congregations to apply for government money to run social services. Supporters of this program invoked a widespread American belief that local citizen groups or religious congregations must be better at serving people than government agencies – often pictured as cold and full of clueless experts out of step with local sensibilities. Yet in practice the participating religious congregations tended to collaborate with government agencies rather than replace them. Congregational volunteers were good at carrying out projects such as food drives, but could not address complicated human needs as well as social workers do.

Interests, Identities, and Civic Trade-Offs

Many who worry about – or study – civic engagement argue that the steep decline of traditional kinds of associations or volunteering put American democracy at risk. Our assessment is more nuanced. We find various styles of effective civic action – informed by different goals, strategies, and self-understandings. Each has its own strengths, weaknesses, and trade-offs.

- Citizen advocates can organize themselves into a **community of interest**, a longstanding form of civic action. In this approach, citizens formulate a distinct focus of action – such as a campaign to pass an affordable housing ordinance in Los Angeles – and aim to collaborate with any organization willing to support their campaign.
- A newer and now widespread form of civic action creates a **community of identity**, where advocates fight for a social category of people or a culturally distinct local community. They may promote affordable housing as one of many issues that matter to low-income people of color in the neighborhoods of South Los Angeles. Rather than pursue a single campaign, they try to resist ongoing processes such as gentrification or racially biased policing that diminish life chances in the community. Fellow advocates are committed for the long-haul, fighting a “hundred years’ war,” as one activist told us. They seek out allies not just for one-time campaigns, but as partners who identify with the community.

Inevitably, there are trade-offs. Communities of interest are good at pursuing broad-based and regional policy campaigns, yet their focus on “winning” a particular result encourages compromises with governmental or corporate power that may marginalize some of their potential constituents. In contrast, communities of identity elicit long-term commitment and tight solidarity, but they may fail to take advantage of the potential benefits of available government money or expertise. Communities of identity and officials may find it hard to deal with one another, because elected leaders who must represent an entire city or district cannot usually identify with the needs and stories of only one community or social identity group over others.

In sum, although political leaders and educators often call for “more” civic action – implying that all civic engagement is pretty much the same, that nearly any kind of civic effort will generate new social ties and make future collaborations easier – accumulating research underlines the need for choices and appreciation of trade-offs. Strategies of civic action vary – and their effectiveness depends partly on what groups define as “effective” given their goals, as well as on the kinds of resources and social connections people are able to deploy in their quests to improve society.

Read more in Paul Lichterman and Nina Eliasoph, “Civic Action.” *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 3 (2014): 798-863.