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Civic Engagement Among American Youth: Research, Activism, and Democracy

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Abstract

This paper examines youth attitudes toward voting and volunteering: the measurable indicators of social capital. First, we review literature on the subject of social capital and civic engagement among youth. Then, we summarize our analysis, available in detail elsewhere, of 2002 and 2004 surveys of youth by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). Using this information, we draw implications for practitioners. Finally, we highlight specific strategies for building social capital among youth — by looking to the long term — and examine one particular youth civic engagement program through this lens.

Introduction

One of the most interesting questions to examine in the civic engagement field involves youth civic engagement. On the one hand, there is much evidence to suggest that young Americans are apathetic: 18- to 24-year olds usually vote less than other age cohorts; they listen to violent, misogynistic music; and are increasingly withdrawing into the “virtual world” of the Internet. Yet simultaneously, today’s youth seem to place a tremendous value on volunteering. According to one commentator, they are protesting and demonstrating more than their baby boomer parents, who came of age during the 1960s and 70s. But historically high rates of youth volunteering dropped recently, and the 2004 election featured a spike in youth voter turnout. How do we explain these phenomena?

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1 This is significantly modified version of an article that we recently published: Goutam U. Jois and Chris Toppe, “Youth Attitudes Toward Voting and Volunteering,” Georgetown Public Policy Review 10, no. 2: 11-43 (2005). The beginning of this paper tracks the GPPR article closely, while the ending is wholly new.
The relevant questions for practitioners focus on more immediate concerns: how can we get today’s young people more engaged in politics, in their communities, and in their world? This question is perhaps even more important given the data from 2004: trends in voting and volunteering moved in unexpected directions — voting went up while volunteering dropped. Should practitioners change their strategies in light of this information?

Benjamin Quinto, Executive Director of the Global Youth Action Network, claims youth are disengaged from the political process because they find it ineffectual. Since they want to make an immediate impact in their communities, they engage in service. This intuitive (and somewhat satisfactory) response raises new questions: what characteristics distinguish those who vote while others find it ineffective? What empirical findings explain the relative similarities and differences between those young people who vote, volunteer, do both, and do neither? Finally, can we bridge the gap between various social institutions (schools, churches, families) to address important community issues?

In this paper, we reject the cynical (or laissez-faire) response: that we should let things be; if young people want to vote or volunteer, they will. Why interfere in what amounts to a naturally-occurring supply and demand — a “market” for civic participation? First, a strong case can be made that the health of our democracy is at stake. In a society valuing the participation of all its citizens, millions of voters are disengaged from politics and increasingly likely to start voting as they get older. Moreover, the fact that many young people volunteer is insufficient to spark long-term engagement; even service-learning is most effective when community service and political service are integrated, combining theory and practice; service and politics.

In America, young people are conspicuously absent from a political system replete with special interests. This has spurred a growth in the number of youth-serving advocacy
organizations. As these organizations coalesce around the poles of voting and volunteering, it becomes evermore important to analyze the characteristics of young people who engage in these activities and those who do not.
Section One: Understanding the Landscape

The best backdrops for our analysis are the 2002 and 2004 National Youth Surveys (NYS) by CIRCLE at the University of Maryland. The 2002 NYS indicated that parental political behavior is one of the biggest factors determining whether young people vote. Additionally, “demographic factors like education, age, partisanship and church attendance” influence levels of political and volunteer activity. Finally, the report notes that voter registration and volunteerism rates are lower in this survey than in previous surveys. In 2004, the decline in volunteering rates continued but voter registration had increased to 70%. Moreover, young people seemed more cynical and less trustful than in 2002; the number of respondents who felt they could make a difference and who trust the government all declined.

Like most analyses, CIRCLE 2002 primarily examines voting and volunteering separately, not across subgroups. It begins by noting that young adults have ambivalent views of politics, with 50% considering voting extremely or very important while 49% say it is somewhat, a little, or not important. By 2004, these numbers were up slightly (but insignificantly), with 53% considering voting important and 46% not.

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2 Conversely, parental disengagement might be a significant reason young people do not vote; after all, parents of today’s children came of age during Vietnam, Watergate, stagflation, the AIDS and crack cocaine epidemics, and economic recession and formed distrustful views of the political system.


4 Ibid., 6. The further drop from 2002 to 2004 in volunteerism might be indicative of a prolonged downward trend: the number of people who said they “never” volunteered in an April 2000 White House Project Education Fund survey was 27% (CIRCLE 2002, 7), but in CIRCLE’s 2004 study, that number nearly doubled, to 53%.

5 CIRCLE, Council for Excellence in Government/Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement National Youth Survey 2004 (College Park, MD: CIRCLE, January 2004, accessed 27 January 2005); available from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/youth_survey_2004_questionnaire.pdf; Internet (cited in-text as “CIRCLE 2004”). In 2004, the survey asked many questions about specific issues (most notably gay and lesbian issues). While important, these questions are not relevant to this analysis.

6 Ibid. The difference, an increase of 2.56%, had an associated t-statistic of 1.333, with p = .1827.
On volunteerism, CIRCLE 2002 notes that today’s youth “believe[] in the importance of community volunteer involvement.”7 However, “[v]olunteer involvement in political activities is much lower than in activities that provide direct service or focus on the community more broadly. As has been seen in other studies, young adults see community activism and political activism as two separate items.”8 Differences between voting and volunteering are manifested rather sharply: 49% of young adults saw volunteering in community activities as important in 2002, but just 12% saw getting involved in politics or government as important. 47% had joined a club or organization that does not deal with politics; only 13% had joined a political club.

Complicating matters, youth voter turnout increased in 2004. While many media outlets reported a “voting rate” of 17%, this figure is misleading. In fact, young people voted at the highest rates in recent history, with 18- to 24-year olds voting at 42.3% and 18- to 29-year olds voting at 52.7%. This represents the youth turnout rate: the percentage of eligible young people that voted.9 The 17% figure represents the youth voting share— the percentage of all voters who were between 18- to 29-years old (the voting share for 18- to 24-year olds was about 7%). This figure stayed constant from 2000 to 2004 because turnout increased across all age cohorts.10

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7 Using the word “generation” is tricky; people use the word differently. In this article, we are referring to the “millennial generation,” as introduced by Strauss and Howe and greatly expounded by Beale and Abdalla. We use Beale and Abdalla’s definition of millennials: those born between 1976 and 1996. The beginning point is chosen because 1976 is the last year of a decline in U.S. annual births (the fewest since 1940). The endpoint is such that the youngest millennials are those who meaningfully recall the turn of the millennium. Scott Beale and Abeer B. Abdalla, Millennial Manifesto: The Youth Activist Handbook (Washington, DC: by the authors, 2003). The millennial generation was between the ages of 7 and 27 in 2003, when CIRCLE’s survey of 15- to 25-year olds was conducted. This largely fits the generational frame and an intuition of when political awareness begins.

8 Ibid., 12, emphasis ours.

9 By way of comparison, according to the Center for Study of the American Electorate, the overall voter turnout rate in 2004 was 60.7%, the highest since 1968.

10 Many gave undue emphasis to the voting share. For example, the San Francisco Chronicle wrote that 2004 “was not the breakout year for young voters.” Siobhan McDonough, “2004 Not the Breakout Year for Youth Vote After All,” San Francisco Chronicle, 2 November 2004, accessed 27 January 2005; available from http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/news/archive/2004/11/02/politics2059EST0779.DTL; Internet. This assumes that young people are not effective political actors unless they swing elections, a criticism that is severely flawed. The fact that a significantly higher number of them turned out to vote is tremendously positive, especially considering the dismal youth turnout years earlier. Finally, voters under 25 “rival in size other coveted swing
Several studies serve to contextualize our analysis here. For example, in 2001, scholars from Yale University sought to determine the efficacy of canvassing in turning out youth voters.\textsuperscript{11} They found phone canvassing and face-to-face voter mobilization campaigns highly effective in stimulating turnout.\textsuperscript{12} This illustrates one way to turn out young voters—just ask. However, it does not tell us what characteristics these voters exhibit \textit{ex ante}, if any. We hope to provide this insight.

We can see the difference between voting and volunteering when comparing the Yale study to the annual Harvard University Institute of Politics survey of college undergraduates. Specifically, the Yale study showed that simply asking someone was the best way to get them involved. But that effect is not equivalent for voting and volunteering. When asked how likely they would be to volunteer on a political campaign if a friend asked (on a scale of 0 to 10, 10 being very likely); 34\% of undergraduates answered with an 8, 9, or 10. When asked how likely they would be to volunteer for community service if a friend asked, nearly twice as many responded with an 8, 9, or 10 (66\%).\textsuperscript{13} Thus, even with respect to peer-to-peer canvassing, there is a strong difference between perceptions of community service and politics.

The Yale study showed that peer contact increases turnout. But the Harvard study indicates that peer contact has greater effectiveness with regard to volunteering. It can be

\textsuperscript{10} By this measure, even the 7-8\% youth \textit{share} for 18- to 24-year olds is substantial.
\textsuperscript{11} Green and Gerber were measuring turnout among those ages 18 to 29.
\textsuperscript{12} Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, \textit{Getting Out the Youth Vote: Results from Randomized Field Experiments} (New Haven, CT: Yale University, December 2001), 26-8.
\textsuperscript{13} Institute of Politics, \textit{Fall 2004 Survey – Top Line Data} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Institute of Politics, October 2004, accessed 27 January 2005), 10; available from http://www.iop.harvard.edu/pdfs/survey/fall_2004_topline.pdf; Internet. Both numbers are up from the October 2003 data, when 65\% had done community service and 21\% participated in a government, political, or issue-related organization. This can probably be attributed, in part, to the presidential election.
inferred from this difference that voters and volunteers have different ex ante characteristics.\textsuperscript{14} Second, both show that young people perceive the importance of politics but feel disengaged from it.\textsuperscript{15} Determining what \textit{would} spur involvement becomes more important.

\textit{Implications for Democracy}

The overriding question is why this is relevant. A simplistic case can be made for increasing democratic participation. But does the difference between voters and volunteers matter? Alison Byrne Fields writes that today’s youth may be “the most engaged generation ever,” though they vote at lower rates.\textsuperscript{16} Yet the title of her paper suggests that participation in our system is a \textit{challenge} for youth. And it is challenging for a very practical reason: young people “do not think that the electoral process generates any ‘tangible’ results.”\textsuperscript{17} In a country where voting is the cornerstone of civic participation, this is troubling.

This idea is reinforced in a variety of studies. CIRCLE 2002 points out that “young adults are more likely to see themselves engaging in the same kinds of activities in which they already tend to participate.”\textsuperscript{18} If youth currently vote at low rates, a minority will likely be involved in the future. The Aspen Institute says people who “establish a pattern of voting when they are young they will be more likely to continue that pattern as they grow older.”\textsuperscript{19}

An empirical study backs up the claim that youth will not “grow into” voting.

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\textsuperscript{14} There are many factors that deter ours whether one votes or volunteers, perhaps overriding the importance of peer contact. However, the higher turnout for volunteering indicates that respondents react to these other factors differently. These reactions must be based on some individual characteristics, and we want to study those characteristics here. (Harvard’s study is limited to college undergraduates. Therefore, the magnitude of this difference cannot be compared directly; however, its relative importance should be noted.)

\textsuperscript{15} Though involvement in politics is up in 2004 (by both CIRCLE’s and Harvard’s measures), the number of people who are \textit{actually} engaged is sharply lower than the number of people who think engagement is important.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 2,3.

\textsuperscript{18} CIRCLE 2002, 13.

grow into “adult roles.” The study identified six interrelated “adult-roles” transitions, and found that “adult-role theory did not fare well. . . . [I]nconsistent and often negative findings point to the conclusion that transitions to adult roles are an incomplete and predominantly inadequate explanation of youth turnout.”

In this context, the 2004 data are interesting. There was a sharp increase in youth voter turnout and a simultaneous decrease in volunteering reported (by CIRCLE 2004). Will these ultimately be seen as outliers or harbingers of a new trend in youth civic engagement? For now, the question is open.

Earlier, we suggested that a lassiez-faire approach could recommend doing nothing; society, left to its own devices, will reach an optimal solution. But as has been shown persuasively, the merit goods argument (raised originally in economic theory) shows the faults of the laissez-faire approach. First, and particularly in the civic engagement field, there are differences between short- and long-term solutions to social problems. In his book, From Neighborhood to Nation, Ken Thomson argues that “there is not a clear link between bowling with a local team, to use Putnam’s famous example, and grappling with the issues of democracy that determine how local, state, and national governments address policy issues.”

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20 Benjamin Highton and Raymond E. Wolfinger, “The First Seven Years of the Political Life Cycle,” American Journal of Political Science 45, no. 1 (January 2001): 203. The adult-roles tested were (1) “settling down” (less residential mobility); (2) marriage; (3) “community ties” (measured by home ownership); (4) getting a job; (5) leaving school; and (6) leaving home.

21 Highton and Wofinger 207. “For the young person who already has all of the adult characteristics, the predicted probability of voting is only 5.9 percentage points greater, much less than the 37 percentage point gap between the turnout of those aged 18-24 and those in their sixties [who presumably embody all of the adult roles]” (Ibid.).


But the answer lies not in the act but in the attitude: if people are bowling in leagues, they are more trusting of others, more engaged with neighbors, and more invested in their communities. Similarly (regarding voting and volunteering), we are ultimately interested in attitudes, which form the basis for long-term solutions. Occasionally volunteering is good; embodying beliefs indicating wholesale engagement with social institutions (of which volunteering might be an indicator) is much more desirable. This desirability is what justifies a merit good “interference” into the civic participation market. As we discuss in the final section, one successful model for building social capital among youth recognizes precisely this distinction — between short-term and long-term engagement — and we attribute its success in large part to that fact.

Implications for Practitioners

The implications of voting and volunteering on democratic participation provide a useful theoretical frame. But practitioners ostensibly take this for granted. After all, it is because we accept these theoretical claims that we are involved in this work; the question of interest is how to improve the results of our activism. How can the characteristics of a highly-engaged young person be fostered? Green and Gerber argue the biggest reason new voters turn out is because someone asked. Should peer contact replace civic education? CIRCLE 2002 says parental political involvement is the biggest predictor of youth involvement. Should this be left to the family, with no room for advocacy organizations?

Fields’s study raises another issue. If our democracy is threatened by the “voter-volunteer gap,” it is particularly important to engage those who are not voting. Organizations

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24 The merit goods argument had been expounded in a variety of other contexts. Wilfried Ver Eecke most powerfully emphasizes that a merit good interference implies a value judgment (see, e.g., Wilfried Ver Eecke. “The Concept of a ‘Merit Good’: The Ethical Dimension in Economic Theory and the History of Economic Thought or the Transformation of Economics into Socio-Economics,” *Journal of Socio-Economics* 27, no. 1: 137-38, 140-41). Here, the value being privileged is civic participation.
(particularly those focused on voting) need tools to help those who “volunteer only” to “vote and volunteer.” Determining what differentiates voters from volunteers can illuminate strategies to get youth volunteers interested in voting— and get those who are doing neither to do something.

Section Two: Crunching the Numbers

In this section, we explicate key findings and implications for practitioners. In doing so, we endeavor to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners. Indeed, one of us (Dr. Chris Toppe) is a professional researcher, while another of us (Goutam U. Jois) got started working as a youth activist. In this paper, we combine theory and practice to inform our empirical analysis and our subsequent implications for practitioners.

Research Design and Hypothesis

In our study, we analyzed youth attitudes toward voting and volunteering from a sample of young Americans ages 15-25. First, we created two binary variables. Voting equals one if the respondent considered voting extremely or very important, zero otherwise. Volunteering equals one if the respondent volunteered in the past year, zero otherwise. This yields two groups for each variable: those who do or do not vote, and those who do or do not volunteer.

Tables 1 and 2 show means for these variables, by year:

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25 The 2002 survey had a sample size of 1,490 while the 2004 survey had a sample size of 1,000. The 2002 survey oversampled African American and Hispanic youth. The data are weighted by age and race to reflect the actual makeup of the national youth population.

26 Since the survey does not ask about voting directly and since not all of the sample is over the age of 18, attitudes toward voting are used as a proxy for voting. This seems reasonable, since we are more broadly concerned with attitudes toward the political system, not just voting per se.

27 In 2002, the question asked was, “How often do you personally participate in volunteer activities with an organization or community group?” (CIRCLE 2002, Question 5). Respondents who reported activity at least once per year were considered “volunteers.” In 2004, the question instead was, “Have you ever spent time participating in any community service or volunteer activity?” (CIRCLE 2004, Question 6). Respondents who said yes, and that such activity was within the past 12 months, were considered “volunteers.” While the two questions are slightly different, it is doubtful that the difference is meaningful. There might be people who, for example, volunteer at a church picnic once a year who would have responded “yes” in 2002 but “no” in 2004 if the picnic was not held in the past 12 months. We take the liberty of assuming such cases are negligible, and in any event not of such widespread occurrence to account for the nearly-15% drop-off in volunteering rates.
Table 1: Voting and Volunteering, 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>voting</td>
<td>1490</td>
<td>0.5022</td>
<td>0.4489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>volunteering</td>
<td>1490</td>
<td>0.4758</td>
<td>0.4483</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Voting and Volunteering, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>voting</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>0.5278</td>
<td>0.4995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>volunteering</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>0.2639</td>
<td>0.4410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean value for voting increased from 50.22% to 52.78% from 2002 to 2004. This group (who consider voting extremely or very important) will be referred to as the “voters.” The sharp drop-off in volunteering is apparent here as well, with the number of those who volunteer falling from 47.58% in 2002 to 26.39% in 2004. These people will be referred to as the “volunteers.” It is important to note two key points. First, the popular conception that there are far more youth volunteers than voters was not borne out, even in 2002. The data contained more voters than volunteers both years, and the difference between means in 2002 (2.64%) was not significant. However, by 2004, the difference (26.39%) was extremely significant.

In other work, we provide a series of descriptive statistics about youth voting and volunteering in this context. For our purposes here, it is only worth noting that there were no meaningful differences between genders, age brackets, or racial groups. Thus, we can move to the backbone of our analysis, our subgroups: those who vote and volunteer, only vote, only volunteer, and do neither. These are shown in Table 3:

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28 The difference between means has an associated t-statistic of 1.6063, not significant even at α=1.
29 The difference between means has an associated t-statistic of 12.4226, with a p-value of p < .001.
30 Jois and Toppe, 49 - 51.
Next, we used two-stage linear discriminant analysis to predict membership in particular groups. CIRCLE’s datasets include hundreds of variables; not all variables from 2002 are repeated in 2004. For this reason, we focus on two subsets of explanatory variables. The first set is “attitudinal,” including trust in government, whether the individual talked about politics with his parents, whether he believes one person can make a difference, etc. The other set is “demographic,” consisting of age, state of residence, church attendance, and similar variables.

We use these sets of variables to conduct a stepwise discriminant function. In our analysis, we consistently classified around 65-80% of observations correctly. This seemingly mundane methodological point is quite important; it demonstrates that the significant variables identified have strong practical importance.

The last section closed with a chart illustrating four subgroups. The following table shows, at a glance, differences in characteristics across groups; each group is compared to all others. Below each header are explanatory variables significant at $\alpha=.05$ or better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value (Voter, Volunteer)*</th>
<th>N, 2002 (total=1490)</th>
<th>N, 2004 (total=1000)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1,1)</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>Highly engaged: vote and volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1,0)</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>Moderately engaged: voter only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0,1)</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Moderately engaged: volunteer only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0,0)</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>Disengaged: non-voting non-volunteers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 = yes, 0 = no

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31 Again, this part of the analysis is covered in much more depth in our other article. Here, we primarily summarize those findings to elaborate on our civic engagement model.
**Table 4: Variables of Statistical Significance Across the Four Subgroups, 2002**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highly Engaged</th>
<th>Moderately Engaged (vote only)</th>
<th>Moderately Engaged (volunteer only)</th>
<th>Disengaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk about politics w/ parents (positive)***†</td>
<td>My vote counts†† (positive)***</td>
<td>My vote counts†† (negative)***</td>
<td>Church attendance (negative)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My vote counts (positive)***</td>
<td>I can make a difference***</td>
<td>Talk about politics w/ parents (negative)***</td>
<td>Leaders pay attention to youth†† (negative)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can make a difference***</td>
<td>Leaders pay attention to youth†† (positive)***</td>
<td>Parents took me to vote†† (negative)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance (positive)***</td>
<td>Church attendance (positive)***</td>
<td>Trust the government (negative)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† The parenthetical notations indicate that, for example, the highly engaged talk about politics with their parents more than the disengaged.

†† Not asked in 2004; note that some question that were not asked have effective proxies in 2004.

*** p < .01

**Table 5: Variables of Statistical Significance Across the Four Subgroups, 2004**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highly Engaged</th>
<th>Moderately Engaged (vote only)</th>
<th>Moderately Engaged (volunteer only)</th>
<th>Disengaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can make a difference***</td>
<td>Talked about politics w/parents (positive)***</td>
<td>Born again/ Evangelical Christian***</td>
<td>Church attendance***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People can generally be trusted***</td>
<td>Trust the government (positive)***</td>
<td>Church attendance***</td>
<td>Talked about politics w/parents (negative)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked about politics w/parents (positive)***†</td>
<td>Parents voted regularly***</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trust the government (negative)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took a class on gov’t/civics***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I can make a difference (negative)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance (positive)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Country of birth***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† The parenthetical notations indicate that, for example, the highly engaged talk about politics with their parents more than the disengaged.

While Born-Again status is significant, those who volunteer only are equally likely to be Born-Again Christians as not; the variable has no practical significance.

*** p < .01; ** p < .05
In both cycles, the highly engaged are more likely to have a favorable view of government and society: they trust others, talk about politics with their parents, believe they can make a difference, and believe elected officials care about young people. We know the groups are different; now, we explore the nature of these differences.

Again, we move past the mechanics of the data analysis to arrive at some of the conclusions. For example, when we compared the highly engaged to the disengaged, we found that the most significant factors that predict whether youth will be highly engaged are developed over time: the belief that one’s vote counts, trust in people, attention paid to politics, and talking about politics with one’s parents.\(^{32}\) Second, they do not show significant differences by race, region (urban/rural) or demographics.\(^{33}\) Engaging young people appears to be a long-term process, not determined by exogenous “social factors.” Moreover, attitudinal factors were even more important in 2004 than they were in 2002. One might think that in an election year, particular demographic groups (e.g., Evangelical Christians) would stand out in the analysis, but they do not.

It is also interesting to note that attending church (or other place of worship; the question is not religion-specific) lost some explanatory power from 2002 to 2004. Observers of the American tradition as far back as Tocqueville have noted the unique role religion plays in America; in 2002, church attendance was one of the most significant factors explaining engagement.\(^{34}\) By 2002 data, someone who attended church regularly was 2.45 times more likely to be highly engaged than someone who did not:

\(^{32}\) Another such variable, the belief that one person can make a difference, was significant at \(\alpha=.05\) in 2002.

\(^{33}\) Having children was statistically significant in 2004, but this does not have any practical meaning; the difference in means between those who were highly engaged and those who were disengaged had a \(p\)-value of 0.5112, indicating that the highly engaged and the disengaged had, statistically speaking, the same number of children.

\(^{34}\) To confirm that this effect was non-sectarian, we used Born-Again/Evangelical status as the explanatory variable for the linear discriminant function; this yielded well over 40% error in 2002 and 2004, not much better than the 50% error rate of a blind guess.
By 2004, the explanatory effect of attending services had dropped in absolute terms (partial R-Square fell by over 75%) and in relative terms (falling from #2 to #7 on the list of explanatory variables). However, the relative likelihood of engagement did not change significantly; in 2004, someone who attended services was 2.53 times more likely to be highly involved. Thus, while church attendance lost some statistical power in 2004, the link between attendance and engagement persists. An analysis of 2002 data commented that “[t]he relationship between regular church attendance and civic engagement is clear.”

A better articulation might add that attending services is correlated with civic engagement to the extent that attending services fosters attitudes of trust and creates engagement opportunities.

Attitudinal variables were important when comparing the highly engaged to the moderately engaged as well. For example, in 2002 and 2004, the highly engaged were more likely than those who only voted to attend religious services and to believe they can make a difference in their community. In 2004, even more attitudinal variables were significant, keeping with the overall trend.

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This was also true when comparing those who voted and volunteered to those who only volunteered. The highly engaged had a stronger “political culture” at home, in 2002 and 2004, than those who were only volunteering. This means moving someone from “volunteer only” to “highly engaged” is probably not a simple process: a strong parental influence means organizations and will probably have a difficult time engaging youth volunteers in political activity. These data bear out the theoretical and empirical studies cited earlier, arguing that a long-term, sustained effort is needed to get volunteers involved in politics.
Section Three: Beyond the Data

In this section, we describe the most important implications of our analysis for practitioners. Then, we use these implications to evaluate one model of a youth social capital-building program. In doing so, we demonstrate that it is possible to structure a programmatic agenda informed by our principles in defining issues, identifying causes, and developing action options. Over the past several years, the vitality of America’s civil society has been the subject of national debate. Here, we hope to highlight the interrelated approach necessary to effectively address this issue. Specifically, groups from families to schools; from advocacy organizations to churches and temples must do their part to rebuilding our social capital. Such a contribution to the theory and practice of civic engagement is the goal of this paper.

Our key findings can be summarized fairly easily. First, attitudes are important; the important predictors of civic engagement are developed over the long-term. Second, institutes such as schools, churches, and families play a significant role in developing these attitudes. Finally, gender, race, and ideology were rarely statistically significant. So what can practitioners glean from this?

- **Attitudes Matter** — A set of variables consistently significant, in both years, was attitudinal. Engaged youth were more likely to trust the government, to trust others, to believe their vote counts, and to believe they could make a difference. The opposite was also true; for example (in 2002), the disengaged believed that politicians cared about young people at rates significantly lower than the highly engaged. It is precisely because (long-term) attitudes are important that the League of Young Voters, for example, works to convince “volunteer-only” youth
of the importance of the political process. But changing attitudes is not an easy process.

**Voting Should Be Treated As A Means** — A voter does not necessarily become engaged, but an engaged person is likely to vote. This seemingly reflexive dictum can be illustrated by the methodology used above. Green and Gerber (Yale, 2001) found that asking young people to vote made them 8-10 times more likely to vote. But here, “voters” were people who considered voting important; we examined an *attitude* toward the political system, and these attitudes are a long time in forming. Practitioners must treat voting as the means to an engaged citizenry. Peter Raducha, who organized National Youth Conventions in 1996 and 2000, says that his organization’s work was not guided by the mere goal of turning out voters. Instead, he said that if young people felt that they had a voice, they would vote on their own initiative. The data bear this theory out.

**Religious Groups Can Play A Role** — As we mentioned above, church attendance is an important predictor of civic engagement. Therefore, youth-serving organizations should partner with religious organizations on issues of mutual interest. This will be helpful to the organizations because they will get access to the churches’ communications and membership networks. Churches, on the other hand, will be able to tap into organizations’ expertise and experience. This is not to suggest that organizations and religious groups have perfectly coincidental goals, but issues like child care, juvenile drug use, teenage crime, and health insurance for youth are issues that both groups are already working on separately— why not do so together?
• **Don’t Ignore Parents** — This goes along with the previous suggestion. The youth civic engagement field does a relatively poor job of linking young people up with their own parents— surprising, considering how hard people in the sector work to connect youth to their community, nation, and world! Freedom’s Answer, in the 2002 election, moilized young people (under the age of 18) to ask ten adults to vote. But this was actually a reversal of the trend we have seen in my analysis: instead of parents influencing their children’s decisions, we see the opposite. Youth-serving organizations should work with parents and stress to them the importance of engaging youth in a long-term and sustainable way. Indeed, for all the time, money, and resources that are spent by organizations, parents are still the most important influence on young people’s lives.

**Section Four: From Theory to Practice**

In this final section, we apply some of our empirical and theoretical findings to a youth civic engagement program in Washington, DC: the YMCA DC Youth & Government Program (Y&G). The program was started in 2002 with and gives high school-age students in Washington, DC “the opportunity to meet city leaders and learn about the legislative process.” But Y&G is equally interesting, particularly for our purposes here, for what it does not do. Y&G programs do not include get-out-the-vote rallies, one-time service projects, or other events that many other youth-serving organizations feature. Instead, the focus at Y&G is on building long-term civic engagement and social capital. For example, the 2004 - 05 Annual report indicates that Y&G’s goals for the upcoming program year include “writing letters to Councilmembers,

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arranging visits with local officials[,] and engaging in local forums.” Other program events are similarly focused on a longer time horizon: the annual Youth Summit is dedicated to dialogue about pertinent present-day issues, while Legislative Weekend features an in-depth look at the District’s legislative process.

The program, now in its fourth year, has been fairly successful at growing at a reasonable pace while building a solid base of student participants. We attribute the program’s early success to its focus on long term issues and answers as well. If the students in the program felt that the events they were attending were essentially ad hoc, they would have little invested in either the program specifically or in the civic engagement process more generally.

One of the more impressive features of the program is its ability to link students’ immediate concerns with long-term processes and practices. For example, in 2004, students debated issues such as the upkeep of their schools, Metro fares, and cleanliness of school restrooms. But these short-term concerns were refracted through the prism of long-term engagement: by meeting with community leaders, engaging elected officials, and working through the political process. By recognizing the efficacy of long-term strategies, Y&G has created a model of civic engagement that holds much promise.

Note, also, that the DC Y&G program is different from others across the country. While there are Y&G programs in over forty states nationwide, few if any programs operate in the context of a detailed academic curriculum and year-round, in-school program. Thus, the DC program is unique in that it effectively conveys the long-term approach to civic engagement, both in form and in substance, to the students involved.

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Y&G stacks up fairly well against our empirical findings (and more specifically, the implications we draw from those findings). We pointed out in the previous section that attitudes matter, and that voting should be treated as a means. Y&G recognizes both of these elements. The long-term engagement strategy that Y&G pursues seems to acknowledge, implicitly, that the goal is to change young people’s attitudes toward the political system rather than prodding them to do this or that act. Similarly, Y&G never runs a get-out-the-vote campaign or anything similar. Here, too, the theory is based on the long term: if young people develop favorable attitudes toward politics now, then they will — of their own volition — vote in the future (this theory is similar to that adopted by organizers of the National Youth Convention, as described above).

Recent literature in legal theory has focused on the importance of “situation” in predicting and explaining policy outcomes. In effect, the argument goes, we miss an important piece of the puzzle when we focus exclusively on people’s choices and treat the resulting outcomes as a product of solely those choices. Similarly, those who attribute voting, volunteering, trust, and other indicators of civic engagement to choice are missing an important element, namely, the situation. Y&G, by focusing on long-term strategies to and payoffs from building social capital, is providing favorable situational context for the youth of Washington, DC. effect, Y&G puts these youth in a position from which they can become actively involved — not only in Y&G but beyond.

This is not to say that the program is without faults. Y&G’s development would likely be well-served by taking heed of our final two implications for practitioners. First, Y&G does a

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poor job of reaching out to families. While the students, once involved, might invite their parents to an isolated event or two, no institutional structure is in place by which they can be reached. This leaves the program without access to a constituency that could be tremendously helpful, in terms of involving students, fundraising, and outreach.

Second, Y&G does not reach out to churches or other religious organizations in DC. Particularly in an urban center where getting access to schools is difficult, reaching out to religious organizations would be all the more important. By failing to include religious institutions in its outreach strategy, Y&G is passing up an opportunity to reach a large number of young people.

But overall, Y&G illustrates one way that a successful youth civic engagement can be structured. By focusing on the long-term aspects of social capital, Y&G provides its youth with an opportunity to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to become meaningful participants in social and political processes for years to come. Earlier in this paper, we crunched the numbers and drew on a theoretical model to come up with implications for practitioners. Here, we have tried to show that these statistical and academic findings can have an impact in the real world, not just in the ivory tower.

**Conclusion**

The youth civic engagement is one of the nonprofit sector’s most vibrant fields. The increasing interest in this substantive area, coupled with the rise in voting rates in 2004, means that this field will likely thrive for years to come. But as an increasing number of organizations enter the mix — and, almost invariably, focus on voting or volunteering — it will be come evermore important to consider what factors influence how young people interact with the social institutions around them.
Moreover, the Y&G model, while by no means perfect, offers practitioners an important insight into the real-world implications of our findings. Specifically, Y&G demonstrates that a focus on long-term engagement and attitudinal shifts is (1) effective when actually working with youth; and (2) useful as a conceptual framework when designing social capital-building programs. The challenge for others in the sector is to use long-term, cross-institutional strategies to engage youth: not replicating the Y&G model, but expanding on it and improving it over time.

In this paper, we have summarized some of our empirical findings from earlier work and applied those findings to one successful model of building social capital among youth. It is our hope that this paper and others like it spark a discussion that will be the first step in reversing America’s decades-long slump in civic engagement.