

Democracy for all:
Increasing Civic Participation Among Disadvantaged Populations

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Abstract

Low levels of civic participation are cause for concern among scholars, public administrators, and nonprofit professionals. The decentralization of many government social welfare programs has increased the need for an active nonprofit sector. These organizations now represent an important group of third party service providers. Contemporary theories suggest that the nonprofit sector can widen democratic participation and create healthier communities, through collaborative processes. Yet, little is known about whether these community engagement strategies by nonprofits can effect civic engagement among disadvantaged populations. This question is examined via three case studies and current theories. Recent surveys found participation to be lowest among nonwhites, immigrants, youth, and ethnic-minorities. However, in the case studies examined for this review, nonprofits were found to increase civic participation among these disadvantaged populations. Long standing community-based organizations and social service-oriented nonprofits were found to be most effective. Due to the limited amount of literature dealing with disadvantaged populations, further research is still needed in this area. Following the literature review, the author will discuss strategies for increasing civic participation among disadvantaged communities.

Keywords: Nonprofit, Immigrant, Nonwhite, African-American, Ethnic, Community, Sex-workers, Social Capital.

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In a democratic society citizen participation is at the heart of the process. Central to this process is the inclusion of many groups, including minorities, different ethnic populations, and other groups who may feel alienated from society. Scholars, however, have noted a decline in civic participation over the last several decades (Putnam 2000, Kidd 2011). Congruent with this decline has been the decentralization of many government services. There is increasing pressure to run governments, and in turn, the nonprofit sector like a business (Smith S., 2010, Eikenberry, Kluver, 2004). These market-like practices have put increased pressure on the nonprofit sector to perform. Furthermore, the policies put in effect to make government smaller have reduced funding to many nonprofits that provide essential services. Especially damaging has been the reduced funding to many social service nonprofits that serve poorer and more disadvantaged citizens (Smith S., 2010, Eikenberry, Kluver, 2004, Blakely, Evans 2008).

There are many debates about how and why civic participation is down, which most scholars consider to be a major problem (Putnam 2000, Smith 2010, Eikenberry, Kluver 2004). A prevailing theory, among scholars and practitioners, is that this decline can be reversed by increasing citizen participation in community programs (Diggs, Roman, 2011, Smith S., 2010, Kidd, 2011). Fundamental to these efforts is the role of nonprofits in enacting community engagement practices at the local level. In the following paragraphs, I hope to answer the question of whether nonprofit community engagement practices can increase citizen participation, with special attention given to disadvantaged populations. For the purposes of this literature review, I have provided a broad definition of disadvantaged populations to include: nonwhites, ethnic minorities, immigrants, poor citizens, and other marginalized groups. It should also be noted, that the focus of this literature is only on Western,

developed societies. First, I will look at theoretical arguments in the literature, to discover if there is a consensus about the benefits of nonprofits to civil society. Subsequently, I will examine three case studies to determine if nonprofits can effectively engage society's most disadvantaged, those whom are often overlooked, and whether these case studies line up with the conclusions of civic engagement theory.

Nonprofits and Civil Society

This study is guided by the idea that civic participation is essential to a democracy's health (Putnam 2000, Kidd 2011, Monroe 1998, Campbell, 2012 Smith S., 2010). Writing in “Bowling Alone” (2000), political scientist Robert D. Putnam argues that America's social capital is in decline. Social capital, as defined by Putnam (2000), is the level of interaction and networks people have within a society (p21.). These networks, Putnam argues, are central to our democracy and create healthier communities. Putnam's theory is backed by several studies, including a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center which stated that only 8 percent of the public had worked on a community project over the past year (Pew Research Center, 2012). His theory has been influential in many scholarly works on the discussion of civic participation, and his data on civic decline has been a driving force in the literature (Kidd 2011, Smith S., 2010). An example of the importance of social capital, Putnam (2000) says, is the extent to which churches have built an advocacy network and have motivated their bases to act politically on several issues, including abortion (p.53).

Scholars have outlined many benefits of nonprofits to citizens, and there is little disagreement about their importance to civil society (Kidd 2011, Smith S., 2010). Further weight was added to these theories by the proclamation in 2009 by President Barack Obama about the need to strengthen democracy and increase civic energy (Comstock-Gay, Goldman, 2009 p.63). Writing in the journal of Community Development, professor Donna Hardina (2006) argues that a key benefit of nonprofits is that they can strengthen community networks (p.4). Political Scientist Steven Rathgeb Smith attributes many benefits to 501(c)3's such as, widening democracy and increasing the efficiency of government

(Smith, S., 2001, p.7). In 1997, the Aspen Institute put together a nonprofit strategy group of professionals, scholars, business leaders, and government members. Participants were asked to discuss the importance of nonprofits and civil society. There was a general agreement among members that nonprofits have the ability to widen the democratic process, increase civic skills, and increase the public's base of knowledge (The Aspen Institute, 2000).

In the following paragraphs, I will look at three different empirical studies: a poor community in West Manchester, England, the poorest areas of Pittsburgh, and two nonprofits started by social sex workers in San Francisco.

The Case for Local Neighborhood Institutions

Dr. Mary L. Ohmer undertook a study on the impacts of four neighborhood nonprofits in metropolitan Pittsburgh. These local organizations, all in poorer areas of the city, focused on community development projects, such as beautification and economic development (Ohmer, 2007, p.109). For the purposes of this study, Ohmer created a cross-sectional survey of members and participants. Each organization was composed of residents, community stakeholders, and locally controlled boards (Ohmer, 2007, p.111-112). Another important factor was that these nonprofits consisted of no more than 100 members. Of those respondents surveyed, 24% had income at or below poverty level. Thirty nine percent of respondents were African-American, and two percent were of other ethnic backgrounds. The average age of respondents was 58 years old (Ohmer, 2007, p.112). This large percentage of older participants mirrors the findings of professors Ramakrishnan and Baldassare (2004), who report that older residents are more likely than other age groups to engage in civic activities (p.81)

Several types of data were included in the author's study, such as: levels of knowledge and skills gained, a member's sense of community, and levels of participation (Ohmer, 2007, p.112-113).

The conclusions of Dr. Ohmer's study found that residents who participated the most were more likely to have an increased sense of community, gained problem solving skills, and were often involved in leadership and decision-making positions. Citizens who had been involved in the decision-making process were found to have as much as a 30% higher gain in skills and knowledge (Ohmer, 2007, p.115). There are several other key findings in this study. For example, by being part of these small communal organizations residents felt closer to their community and were more likely to engage in activities to help the public good. One good example the author notes is that residents would be more likely to become involved if they saw children skipping school or if the local firehouse was facing budget cuts (Ohmer, 2007, p.113). This study highlighted a couple of important variables of interest to nonprofit professionals seeking to increase citizen engagement. All of the organizations surveyed involved community members in the decision-making process and were smaller neighborhood organizations. These findings were replicated in a similar case study, albeit in a more affluent community, done by Ferman and Kaylor (2001), who found that local community organizations were the most effective at increasing citizen participation and improving local conditions (p.65). A neighborhood organization in Portland known as the "Neighborhood Pride Team" was reported in the local newspaper as having a similar effect on community building in poor urban areas. Residents were quoted as saying they felt closer to their community and had gained problem solving skills. (Smith, L., 1997) "The Neighborhood Pride Team" used computer classes and health outreach activities to increase the skills and knowledge of community residents (Smith, L., 1997). While survey data from Pittsburgh is encouraging, more research needs to be done in this area. A key factor is that these changes occurred mostly at the local level and that the areas studied still remain relatively poor. These findings replicate those of Putnam (2000), who contends that older, more established social networks are most effective (p53.)

Barriers to Participation: The Case of West Manchester (England)

Over the last several years, the focus of the New Labor Party has been on increasing participation locally in order to improve poor urban areas. However, British scholars Georgina Blakeley and Brendan Evans argue that this approach is misguided and to date has not worked. There are too many barriers to participation for lower-income citizens (Blakeley, Evans, 2008 p. 106). These authors are not the only ones to criticize the emphasis put on collaborative governance. James Morone details in his book, "the Democratic Wish," that participatory practices during the 1960's and 1970's often failed to meet their overall agenda or the results were mixed at best. More often than not, community members instead became embroiled in their own political conflicts (Monroe, 1998, p. 268-269).

Blakeley and Evans initiated a study on participation levels in the very poor neighborhoods of West Manchester, surveying 276 residents. To be fair, this case study concerns not just nonprofits, but rather the wider issue of participation levels among citizens in local organizations and government. Nevertheless, the study's findings do add to the literature and raise questions about trends in the efficacy of civic engagement theory. Residents surveyed noted that the main reason for lack of participation was time and family constraints (Blakeley, Evans, 2008 p. 106). While residents expressed a general interest in participation, they were skeptical about the benefits. Blakeley and Evans (2008) found it "paradoxical that those people least equipped to solve social and economic problems are charged with the task (...) (p. 106). The results of their study were very different from the participation levels noted in the Pittsburgh case (Ohmer, 2007, p. 112-113). Many residents in West Manchester felt like the areas they lived in lacked a sense of community, noting that some members simply drank all day (Blakeley, Evans, 2008 p. 106). As noted by several scholars, for participation to be successful communities must have strong informal networks (Putnam, 2000, Ferman, Kaylor, 2010).

Blakeley and Evans conclude that the public cannot solve social development problems on their own. While not discounting positive effects a person may get from volunteering, they argue that

government reforms are necessary to fix the overarching social and economic inequalities in many communities (Blakeley, Evans, 2008 p.110-111). To be sure, there are tough decisions to be made by administrators. Community engagement practices cannot solve all of society's problems, however, many studies have shown citizen participation begets more participation (Denhardt, Denhardt 2001, Ferman, Kaylor, 2010, Putnam, 2000). Although their findings differ from the majority of the literature, there is some agreement with current trends. Numerous public administrators and scholars have lamented the decline of social services offered by the government (Smith, S., 2010, Eikenberry, Kluver 2004, Ramakrishnan, Baldassare, 2004). Instead nonprofits, many of whom face budget constraints, are now forced to provide these essential goods to the public.

Blakley and Evans conclusions gained further support from the 2004 publication of an extensive report of political and civic participation in California. This report found the lowest levels of participation to be among youth, nonwhites, immigrants and poorer communities. The study also concluded that disadvantaged populations faced many roadblocks to participation (Ramakrishnan, Baldassare, 2004). For example, nonwhite residents, they found, were less likely to have the knowledge and skills necessary to take part in the civic process (Ramkrishnan, Baldassare, 2004). As noted, however, there are some limitations to these studies because they do not deal directly with the nonprofit sector. Nevertheless, these reports still raise concerns about the ability of the nonprofit sector to effect change and are cause for further research.

Social Service Nonprofits: Offering Citizen Participation

In her review of two nonprofits in the San Francisco Area, advocating on behalf of the rights of sex workers, Samantha Majic came to similar conclusions as those noted by Dr. Ohmer. Like other political scientists and public administration scholars, Majic argues that participation in civic life is so low that it is unhealthy. Citing the American Political Science Association, she argues that our democracy is at risk (Majic, 2011, p. 821). Dr. Majic (2011), like Blakley and Evans, thinks civic

participation is being increasingly left to the more affluent and highly educated in society (p.821). This trend is partly due to the economy and decentralization, which has increased the number of poor and disadvantaged citizens (Majic, 2011, p. 822). Given these facts, Majic is interested in seeing what, if any, effects social service organizations might have on marginalized groups.

California Prostitutes Education Project and the St. James Infirmary, both started by sex workers, give several examples of the nonprofit sector's ability to increase civic participation (Majic, 2011, p.821). By engaging with government agencies in policy-making, these nonprofits are able to offer constituents many civic opportunities (Majic, 2011, p. 824). According to staff, the political discourse that occurred at many of the meetings, and even expressed in banners on their walls, helped to promote conversations among members on the need for further engagement (Majic, 2011, p. 827). Organizations which gather marginalized people around a singular cause, such as HIV/AIDS treatment and LGBTQ populations, have made great progress in the last two decades in advancing their cause. Similar to the outcomes of Dr. Ohmer's study, members of these organizations felt they develop a sense of community, and most important for the sex workers was that a safe space was provided for them to gather (Majic, 2011 p. 825).

Also in practice at these nonprofits was the creation of opportunities for citizen participation in the decision-making process. Members acquired leadership skills, became better at collective decision-making, and learned management techniques. This was not an isolated case; creating leadership roles for participants has been shown to be effective across a broad spectrum of nonprofits (Hardina, 2006, p. 12, Leroux, 2009 p.506). For instance, in social scientist Dr. Baggetta's study on choral groups across America, a common practice was providing avenues for citizen governance (Baggetta, 2009, p.179). Dr. Majic's study seems to confirm that these processes can also work for marginalized groups.

It should be noted that professor Majic would agree with many of the sentiments expressed by Evan and Blakley. Social service nonprofits rely heavily on government funding for the production of

services (Majic, 2011, p. 823). On balance, however, her conclusions are starkly different; social service organizations often work collaboratively with some of society's poorest members (Majic, 2011, p.832). Dr. Majic, like many scholars, thinks it necessary to expand research into the nonprofit sector's ability to increase civic engagement, so that social scientists can better understand how an organization engages citizens in civic life (Hardina, 2006, LeRoux, 2009)

Conclusions

With the decentralization of government services, the nonprofit sector has an increasingly large role to play. Studying organizational effects on public participation has never been more essential. While the work of Evans and Blakley has demonstrated that civic engagement is a difficult process, it remains very important. No one is suggesting the government does not have a role to play; rather governments can help create a successful environment for an organization. Government funding has been shown to increase participation in the nonprofit sector, allowing citizens to give feedback and participate in the decision-making process (LeRoux, 2009, p.508). Many social welfare organizations are engaged in civic practices daily. Homeless shelters, food pantries, and halfway houses are just a few of the organizations which offer avenues for participation (Majic, 2011, p.832). In order to include the most disadvantaged in society, nonprofits must continue to collaborate with citizens (Majic, 2011, Diggs, Roman, 2011, Kidd, 2011). This is a long slow process that takes time and commitment from nonprofit administrators (Ohmer 2007, Hardina 2006, Ramakrishnan, Baldassare, 2004). Overall, the literature shows that social service nonprofits and smaller more community based nonprofits appear well equipped to do this (Majic, 2011, Ferman, Kaylor, 2001, Ohmer, 2007).

Strategies: A discussion

“When people are engaged, it creates the momentum for change and builds healthier communities by bringing citizens closer together.”

For some time, scholars, politicians, and administrators have been trying to foster more cooperation between citizens and government. It is important to remember that as a democracy we should encourage participation in this process. Participating in a free and open society is a privilege that much of the world's population does not enjoy. It is unfortunate that so many Americans do not take a more active part in this process. Hopefully, public administrators, nonprofits, and citizens can use these recommendations as a guide moving forward.

The following section examines three ways to increase civic engagement with respect to disadvantaged populations. Pros and cons are weighted for each solution, with a recommendation for the best way to move forward. Suggestions are measured via three criteria: inclusiveness, commitment to collaboration, and sustainability.

Strategy #1: Online Participation

Forms of online participation are currently being explored around the country. This avenue is definitely intriguing, as websites offer some concrete benefits.

- Websites can be used as a marketing tool to distribute materials that educators utilize or that help increase the public's awareness.
- Websites can be utilized to motivate people to donate to organizations or to coordinate events.
- Online forums can facilitate a form of in person dialogue (Public Agenda, 2008).

These ideas are intriguing and have some usefulness, but there are a few drawbacks to this approach. First, those living in poorer or rural areas might not have reliable internet service or even access to computers. Also, people must have a certain level of proficiency with computers. Secondly, while the internet is a great way to connect with like-minded people, it is not the best way for interaction among diverse populations. Furthermore, while local meetings have the benefit of a moderator or administrator to navigate the discussion in productive ways, during online meetings, a group with a specific agenda can easily dominate the discussion. For example, the Obama administration hosted the first ever online

town hall, during which the President had hoped to speak about the economy, but the White House website was overrun with questions about marijuana legalization. An organization that favored the legalization of the drug prompted thousands of its members to log on and ask questions (Davies, 2009). Similar problems may arise when outside influences seek to dominate a discussion of local issues. One hypothetical situation could be an online forum about keeping the historic main street in town open only for local businesses. A large corporation, lobbying to place its business there, might encourage their workers to flood the website with information favoring the company. In person meetings take careful planning, while online meetings require little preparation, but are much harder to control. On balance, these practices, if used in-cooperation with meetings in person, can have a benefit, but they are not a viable replacement for real dialogue (Public Agenda, 2008).

Strategy #2: Creation of a National Service Corps or Relaxing the Requirements for Americorps (Hyman & Levine, 2008).

Americorps is growing annually and thousands of Americans have participated in this program. This strategy calls for the requirements of Americorps volunteers to be loosened to allow for high school students or older adults without college degrees to serve. Currently, in order to volunteer you must have a college degree. Another suggestion is the creation of a national service organization that students could join after high school. National service-oriented programs, such as Americorps or even an international program like the Peace Corps, foster many civic benefits.

- National or international volunteering outfits provide opportunities to build leadership skills and are very much a hands-on experience in program management.
- These organizations encourage furthering one's education by providing scholarships for graduate studies or offering loan forgiveness.
- Volunteers are active in very poor and marginalized communities and transfer new skills to residents.

Increasing the number of participants in programs such as these is indeed worthwhile. Trying to recruit people from disadvantaged populations also is desirable. This strategy, nevertheless, has some drawbacks. In order to serve in an outfit like Americorps, a certain level of experience is needed. Volunteers may find themselves mentoring high school students, teaching ESL, or helping with complicated grant projects. These types of activities are not something that a typical high school student is well prepared to undertake. Moreover, at that age young adults may not be mature enough to handle the difficult responsibilities of a one to two-year commitment. What about allowing some older adults with more experience? While this is possible and might be a good idea for some, a lot of older adults, especially those who are poor, do not have the time to commit to such a program, or they suffer from a language barrier. Americorps pays less than 20,000 dollars a year, which is inadequate to support a family. In addition, opportunities are not always available where volunteers live and require moving out-of-state. Any commitment to widen national service programs is commendable. On the other hand, this strategy is not inclusive enough.

Strategy 3#: Increasing Face to Face Participation and More Community Involvement.

Face to face participation is a process that requires a lengthy time commitment. It involves community meetings, focus groups, and follow up meetings. The benefits are numerous:

- Creates a momentum for change.
- Creates diversity and a shared responsibility among stakeholders.
- Builds citizen leaders.
- Fosters cooperation and trust among different populations and interest groups (Public Agenda, 2008).
- Improves sustainability (Diggs & Roman, 2011).
- Improves the sense of community among residents (Ohmer, 2007).

This type of deliberation necessitates a commitment to the ideals of collaboration, equality, and diversity. Stakeholders must be connected at every step of the process. It is not enough to hold a public hearing; citizens must have a voice in the discussion. Moreover, this process is time-consuming and may require funding by local governments. Due to the nature of this approach it may not be appropriate or possible all the time (Public Agenda, 2008) Some decision-making requires quick action and this process can sometimes take a year or longer. Nonetheless, it is the most inclusive and sustainable of all the approaches.

Recommendation: Face to Face Engagement and More Community Involvement.

A Look at Case Studies.

Portland, OR.

Women in one of Portland's most poverty-stricken areas, worked together with a local nonprofit to increase health awareness. Residents felt an increased sense of hope about the future and were learning valuable skills.

“Residents were helping them help themselves” (Smith, 1997).

Bridgeport, CT.

Bridgeport, Connecticut is one of the best examples of a city that has increased its overall well-being and capacity to cooperate. This city has a population just under 140,000, and its residents speak over 60 different languages. For more than a decade, with the help of several local and national organizations, Bridgeport has sustained an engagement model for the purposes of increasing public dialogue. Thousands of residents have participated in large-scale community conversations on public safety, education, and bully prevention, along with several other topics. Local leaders from Bridgeport had many positive reflections. One business leader, Kathy Saint, had this to say:

“What happened with the [engagement efforts] is there

were some people that got involved from very, very different backgrounds. They worked really well together. They were willing to really share and collaborate” (Friedman & Kadlec & Birnback, 2007).

Lynchburg, VA.

City administrators and the Mayor in Lynchburg, Virginia, along with community leaders, have utilized a more participatory form of governance. Through the use of small community discussions and open-ended dialogues, members of the public have convened on the issues of racism, public education, and crime. In less than two years, more than 1,300 people had participated. This program has since evolved into an ongoing and self-sustaining organization known as “Many Voices One Community” (Duzr, 2014).

Kimball Pain, the City Manager, in speaking about these changes, said:

“I would say that for one thing we hear from people who we wouldn’t normally hear from. I’m thinking particularly about our budget processes. The recession really got us focused on the budget. [W]e did a series of community outreach initiatives over several years [and] got input from people who wouldn’t normally stand up in front of a large group and speak. Through this process we actually got the community to support a tax increase [...] in an election year”

(Duzr, 2014).

Chelsea, MA.

Chelsea, a small city in Massachusetts that is home to many immigrants, was ranked as Boston's poorest city in 2000 and suffered from high levels of crime (Bash & Amato & Sacks, 2010). City officials, along with the public, started organizing neighborhood watch groups. These increases in dialogue between the department and citizens fostered greater trust. With the help of residents and a grant from the Justice Department, the police formed a Conflict Intervention Unit (CIU) to train

citizens in conflict resolution to handle noncriminal disputes. This program has saved the city thousands of dollars, improved safety, and allowed police to concentrate on more violent crimes.

“CIU is confirming a growing feeling that the Chelsea city government is working to improve the quality of their lives” (Bash & Amato & Sacks, 2010).

“Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'what are you doing for others?’”

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

No process is perfect. This is not an easy task and many problems can arise. Collaboration takes time, along with a deep commitment to democratic ideals and an understanding of the value of collaboration. Administrators should not merely create meetings, but instead seek to promote a culture of public problem solving. Operations were most successful when citizens were setting the agenda. Communities prospered when they sought to widen engagement (Farkas & Johnson & Shaw, 1995). By working with people from different backgrounds and differing opinions, you can raise mutual respect with the hope of working towards the common good.

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