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Growing Social Inequalities in Youth Civic Engagement? Evidence from the National Election Study

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ABSTRACT Social class differences in civic engagement persist for both youth and adults. Although empirical evidence is mixed, several recent social changes pertaining to youth suggest that social inequalities in civic engagement may be growing over time for young people. Using data from the National Election Study, we compared trends for youth and older adults of varying education levels and tested the hypothesis of an increasing educational disparity in youth political participation. Results for voting supported our expectations: declines over time were found for less-educated youth only. Unexpectedly, participation in other political activities for more-educated youth declined more over time compared to other groups. Our findings highlight the need to create equal opportunities for youth civic engagement across social groups.

American democracy is founded on the premise of citizens' participation, and likewise, citizenship entails full expression of the rights and responsibilities inherent in societal membership (Walzer 1989). Unfortunately, social class differences in political participation and community engagement in the United States persist (Verba, Burns, and Lehman 2003), and these inequalities seriously undermine the representativeness of democracy. From a developmental perspective, historical shifts in the nature of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, along with other social changes affecting youth, indicate that social inequalities in civic engagement among young people have increased in recent years (Finlay, Wray-Lake, and Flanagan 2010). Building on recent empirical findings among youth (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) 2011; Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, and Briddell 2011), this study used data from the National Election Study collected during the past 50 years to determine whether social class differences in civic engagement are increasing.

SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Social inequality is an obstacle for civic engagement because educational and economic resources confer advantages in the civic

domain. Associations between socioeconomic disparities and civic engagement have been widely documented among adults as well as youth, at the neighborhood level, and for a range of behaviors including voting, other political activities, and volunteering (Hart and Atkins 2002; Kinder and Sears 1985; McFarland and Thomas 2006; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Social inequalities in civic engagement are also evident among youth around the world (Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, and Nikolova 2002). The social class divide in civic engagement can be partly attributed to disadvantages that accumulate during childhood and adolescence as well as the lack of institutional opportunities for civic participation available to individuals who do not attend college (Flanagan and Levine 2010). Beyond participatory behaviors, socioeconomic disparities also extend to civic knowledge, skills, and feelings of empowerment (Levinson 2010). Verba and colleagues (2003) argued that class differences in political participation are largely the result of educational disparities, with education being the "single most substantial and most multi-faceted influence on political activity" (47). Thus, investigations of socioeconomic inequalities in civic engagement typically operationalize socioeconomic status in terms of education (CIRCLE 2011; Syvertsen et al. 2011).

Here we ask an important, unanswered, question: have social inequalities in civic engagement grown in recent years? Evidence from a national study of high school seniors from 1976 to 2005 suggested that social class disparities (measured by adolescents' college aspirations) in voting intentions and volunteering have expanded since the early 1990s (Syvertsen et al. 2011). Persistent, yet stable, class differences were found for political behaviors, trust in government, and public hope. However, other evidence has *not*

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found increasing social inequalities in civic trends. For example, data from the Census Current Population Survey showed a large but stable gap in the voting rates of 18 to 29 year olds from 1972 to 2008 when comparing youth based on college experience versus no college experience (CIRCLE 2011). These conflicting results may be due to differences in civic engagement measures (i.e., voting intentions versus reported voting behavior) or in population (high school seniors versus 18–29 year olds). To better understand whether disparities are growing and for whom further exploration is needed.

UNIQUE TRENDS FOR YOUTH?

These previous analyses of educational disparities in civic engagement over time have exclusively examined youth (i.e., 18 to 29 year olds). Thus, an implicit assumption is that social inequalities may be growing for young people in particular; indeed, theory and some research suggest that this assumption is plausible for at least three reasons.

First, changes to the education system, such as cuts to funding and institution of the No Child Left Behind Act, have forced secondary education to focus on basic subjects and deemphasize civic education (Kahne and Middaugh 2008). Therefore, youth of varying backgrounds are less likely to gain equal exposure in school to civic education and preparation for civic life than in previous decades. Second, the transition to adulthood has become more

For youth who are exposed to less civic education in high school and who do not plan to attend college, institutional opportunities for civic engagement may be increasingly important.

protracted in recent decades, with youth taking longer to settle into adult roles and establish residential stability (Arnett 2000; Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005). Delays in establishing adult roles and community ties parallel documented delays in civic participation such as voting (Flanagan and Levine 2010). This delay suggests that historical trends for youth as compared to older adults exhibit more variability in civic engagement over time. The uncertainty of this developmental transition may compromise the optimal development of more vulnerable youth (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth 2006). Third, fewer institutional opportunities now exist for youth to become involved in politics and community life after high school (Finlay, Wray-Lake, and Flanagan 2010; Flanagan and Levine 2010; Jennings and Stoker, 2004). For example, members of the World War II generation were offered a range of institutionalized civic opportunities from the New Deal, Civilian Conservation Corps, and G.I. Bill; yet, since the 1970s, these types of government support programs have eroded (Finlay et al. 2010). For youth who are exposed to less civic education in high school and who do not plan to attend college, institutional opportunities for civic engagement may be increasingly important.

Our study more rigorously tested the idea that social inequalities in civic engagement are growing among youth by using data from the National Election Study (NES), in which participants span the entire range of adulthood, and compared trends for youth with trends for older adults. In line with previous studies (CIRCLE 2011; Syvertsen et al. 2011; Verba et al. 2003), we operationalized social

class in terms of education. Based on the measures available, our analyses focused on voting and other political activities. Specifically, given that previous studies examined evidence for the social class divide exclusively among young people (CIRCLE 2011; Syvertsen et al. 2011), we considered whether a growing educational disparity in voting and political behaviors would be more evident, or only evident, among 18 to 29 year olds. In other words, we hypothesized an education \times survey year \times age interaction such that rates of political participation for less-educated young people would decline more steeply over time compared to more-educated youth and older adults of any education level.

METHOD

Data came from the National Election Study, a cross-sectional time series study designed to understand Americans' voting and public opinion. Face-to-face interviews primarily have been used to survey a nationally representative sample of US adults ages 17 to 99 ($M = 45.76$, $SD = 17.15$) biennially since 1952. A multistage probability sampling design was used to sample individuals of voting age from US Census regions, Census blocks, and housing units that are stratified by geography, size, and median per capita income. Our study used postelection interview data from the 1952 to 2008 presidential election years (i.e., 15 data points across 56 years) and from individuals at least 18 years old. Sample size ranged from 1,060 to 2,366 across years, with approximately 26,000

individuals participating overall (56% female). See table 1 for ethnicity of sample across survey years. Data weights were used in all analyses to ensure representativeness of the sample.

Measures

Voting was measured by asking individuals whether they voted in the most recent presidential election (*yes* = 1, *no* = 0). Participants were also asked whether or not they attended political meetings or rallies, worked for a party or candidate, displayed a candidate button or sticker, and donated money to a party or candidate during the campaign (*yes* = 1, *no* = 0). Political activities were measured as the sum of these four behaviors. Frequencies of voting and political activities across years are shown in table 1 and means for study variables are displayed in table 2.

Respondents reported highest level of education completed on a four-point scale: *8th grade or less* (1), *high school* (2), *some college* (3), and *college or advanced degree* (4). Age was calculated from respondents' reports of their birthdates and measured in years (i.e., 18 to 99). Year of survey was entered as a linear continuous variable. Sex (*female* = 2, *male* = 1), ethnicity (dummy coded into *Black* and *Other* with *White* as the reference group), and employment (*employed* = 1, *unemployed* = 0) were included in models as control variables.

RESULTS

Two regression models were examined to test the theory-driven hypothesis of an education \times year \times age interaction. A logistic

Table 1
Frequencies of Race/Ethnicity, Voting in Presidential Election, and Sum of Political Actions by Year

YEAR	RACE/ETHNICITY			VOTED		SUM OF POLITICAL ACTIONS				
	White	Black	Other	No	Yes	0	1	2	3	4
1952	1430	155	3	1177	1097	75	32	10	1430	155
1956	1586	143	6	1260	1148	119	33	19	1586	143
1960	1657	149	18	1440	1102	157	64	25	1657	149
1964	1283	146	11	1120	908	95	43	32	1283	146
1968	1236	133	18	1051	819	88	42	22	1236	133
1972	1982	216	67	1650	1350	169	72	27	1982	216
1976	2019	218	129	1690	1303	228	64	32	2019	218
1980	1164	166	71	997	827	90	29	18	1164	166
1984	1562	216	174	1436	1179	123	43	19	1562	216
1988	1336	212	183	1210	1123	102	42	16	1336	212
1992	1675	285	220	1637	1263	141	46	28	1675	285
1996	1162	179	177	1152	1005	76	26	17	1162	179
2000	1179	162	176	1153	905	93	32	9	1179	162
2004	758	164	138	834	495	115	26	15	758	164
2008	1046	521	482	1564	1067	177	60	40	1046	521

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

VARIABLE	M	SD
Education Level	2.40	0.98
Age	45.7	17.4
Political Activities	0.56	0.85
Voting	0.74	0.45
Employed	0.59	0.50

regression model was conducted to examine the binary outcome of voting; negative binomial regression was used to examine political activities, given that this distribution is appropriate for modeling a count variable. Independent variables were entered simultaneously to examine unique effects. Presentation of results focuses on interpretation of the highest level interaction effect for parsimony and based on a priori predictions.

Voting

The results of regressing voting on demographic control variables, year of survey, education, age, and interactions between survey year, education, and age are presented in table 3. Results indicated that female individuals, individuals of Black and other ethnicities, and unemployed individuals had lower odds of voting in presidential elections. More educated individuals had higher odds of voting, and there was also an age × education interaction. Table 4 illustrates effect sizes by showing odds ratios for individuals ages 25, 45, and 65 and across 1960, 1980, and 2000. A one-unit increase in educational attainment related to 1.9 to 2.5 higher

odds of voting in presidential elections across years and ages. Odds ratios increased in relation to year and age.

The main effects and two-way interactions between survey year, age, and education were qualified by a significant three-way interaction (see table 3 and figure 1). To facilitate presentation of the interaction, education was coded into higher (some college or more) versus lower (high school education or less) levels, and age was coded into younger (18–34) and older (55 and older) groups. A small but stable difference was noted in voting rates for older adults by education (favoring the more educated), whereas trends diverged for younger individuals depending on education levels. In support of our hypothesis, a substantial decline in voting rates was evident across 1952 to 2008 for younger and less-educated individuals only.

Political Activities

A regression model examined the same set of main effects and interactions in relation to political activities (see table 5). As with voting, women and individuals reporting an ethnicity other than Black or White reported lower levels of political activity participation. Also similar to voting, employed individuals were more engaged in political activities. Again, main effects and two-way interactions for survey year, education level, and age were qualified by a significant three-way interaction. Education and age were dichotomized as described earlier for displaying the interaction. As seen in figure 2, patterns were not consistent with our expectations. A sizeable education disparity in political participation rates was evident among older adults across the study period, and political activity rates for younger and older individuals with a high school education or less were similarly low across the six decades. However, the interaction revealed that more educated young people demonstrated a decline in political activities

Table 3
Logistic Regression of Voting on Predictors

VARIABLE	ESTIMATE	SE
Intercept	1.1737***	0.0380
Year	-0.096**	0.0325
Female	-0.012***	0.0012
Education Level	0.8396***	0.0215
Age	0.0325***	0.0012
Black	-0.283***	0.0443
Other	-0.498***	0.0567
Employed	0.3333***	0.0344
Year × Education	0.0039**	0.0012
Year × Age	0.0001	0.0001
Education × Age	0.0031*	0.0012
Year × Education × Age	-14E-5*	0.0001

*p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 4

Estimated Odds Ratios for Voting for a One-Increment Increase on the Educational Attainment Scale for 3 Years and 3 Ages

AGE	YEAR		
	1960	1980	2000
25	1.90	2.18	2.49
45	2.14	2.32	2.50
65	2.42	2.46	2.51

Table 5

Poisson Regression of Sum of Political Activities on Predictors

PARAMETER	ESTIMATE	SE
Intercept	-0.6077***	0.0224
Year	-0.1725***	0.0194
Female	-0.0023***	0.0006
Education Level	0.3692***	0.0104
Age	0.0033***	0.0006
Black	-0.0580	0.0310
Other	-0.0933*	0.0382
Employed	0.1119***	0.0221
Year × Education	-0.0017**	0.0006
Year × Age	0.0001**	0.0000
Education × Age	0.0005	0.0006
Year × Education × Age	0.0001**	0.0000

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

over time, with participation rates converging with, rather than diverging from, the rates of their less-educated, same-age counterparts. As figure 2 suggests, this convergence began in the 1970s and gradually continued through the early 2000s. Interestingly, political participation across groups increased during the 2004 presidential election and showed relatively high rates during the 2008 election.

DISCUSSION

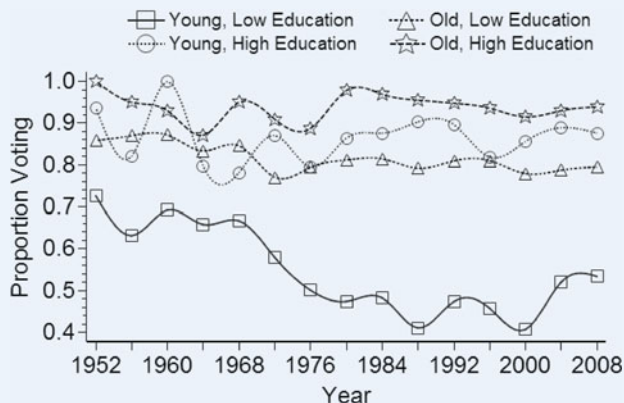
Using a nationally representative sample, our results partially supported the hypothesis that social inequality in civic engagement has grown for youth in the United States in recent years. A pattern of growing social inequality among youth was clearly evident for voting, as declines in voting rates were steeper for less-educated youth compared to older adults or more-educated youth. Results for political activities did not support our hypothesis, but we found declining rates in participation for more-educated youth coupled with low but stable rates for less-educated youth.

Voting

Our findings suggest that, for young people, national election decisions are being increasingly left to the more educated. The same pattern of growing social inequality in voting was found by Syvert-

Figure 1

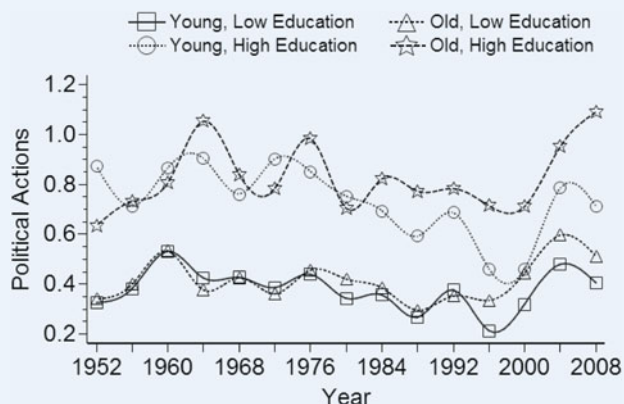
Voting Rates by Election Year, Education Level, and Age



Note. Figure illustrates significant education × age × year interaction in predicting voting. Education is coded as high (some college or more) versus low (high school education or less). Age is coded as young (18–34) versus old (55 and older).

Figure 2

Political Activity Participation by Election Year, Education Level, and Age



Note. Figure illustrates significant education × age × year interaction in predicting political activities. Education is coded as high (some college or more) versus low (high school education or less). Age is coded as young (18–34) versus old (55 and older).

sen and colleagues (2011), who examined historical trends in voting intentions among a nationally representative sample of high school seniors. Thus, our study essentially replicates their previous findings for voting, yet also builds on their work by using self-reports of actual voting behavior, empirically comparing youth to adults to clarify that the social inequalities are specific to youth, and examining a longer historical time span. Given that data reported by CIRCLE (2011) from the Census Current Population Survey are also nationally representative, it is perplexing that their reported trends in voting for 18 to 29 year olds did not show the pattern of increasing social inequality.

Despite the inconsistent results reported by CIRCLE, we believe that our results, as well as those of Syvertsen et al. (2011), call for increased attention to educational disparities in voting among young people. Although college enrollment has steadily increased over the past few decades, many individuals do not graduate; for example, only 32% of individuals aged 25 to 34 held a bachelor's

degree or higher in 2009 (US Census Bureau 2010). Thus, a large proportion of the youth population does not complete college and is at risk for underrepresentation in national election decisions. From political science research, we know that voting habits tend to be established during youth and persist across adulthood (Plutzer 2002). Thus, redressing social inequalities in youth civic engagement is not only important for current generations of youth but perhaps also for future generations of older adults.

Political Activities

In examining political activities other than voting, results indicated an unexpected pattern: more-educated youth showed the steepest declines in participation rates over time. These results may be partly explained by a floor effect in the political activities of less-educated youth: their rates were quite low across the study period (averaging around .4 on a 0 to 4 scale), and thus could not show much more decline over time. In addition, perhaps activities with traditional political parties—such as attending meetings, campaigning, and donating money to campaigns or parties—are falling out of favor with educated youth. Some scholars suggest that traditional engagement is being replaced by new forms such as online activities, consumer politics, and other more informal

civic behavior is a not a direct reflection of age, education, and historical cohort, but is also a product of culture, political issues, societal norms, and laws. Studying a broader age range of youth would be beneficial; our study was limited to youth aged 18 and older, yet adolescents can engage in politics and community life in meaningful ways prior to eligibility to vote.

Implications

Evidence for growing social inequalities in youth voting is now accumulating, and educational disparities persist. Our results also revealed civic inequalities in other social groups, joining previous research in documenting that ethnic minorities, female, and unemployed individuals are less politically involved (e.g., Putnam 2000; Verba et al. 1995). Research is sorely needed that suggests effective ways to engage underrepresented groups in the political process. For example, political parties could interface more directly with young people and issues concerning youth; there was some anecdotal evidence of increases in these kinds of efforts during the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections (e.g., Schifferes 2008), and as our results indicated, participatory behaviors for youth likewise showed some gains in these years. Educational reform could encourage a renewed focus on civic education that

Our findings suggest that, for young people, national election decisions are being increasingly left to the more educated.

types of civic engagement (e.g., Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins 2002). Insofar as more-educated youth have more economic and social resources, they may have more opportunities to replace conventional politics with novel ways to engage in social issues. An alternative explanation is that more-educated youth in the United States may be becoming more satisfied with only voting and simply less engaged in other domains of civic life. The social changes for youth described earlier—which portend decreased emphasis on civic education in schools, delayed acquisition of adult roles, and fewer institutional opportunities—could be suppressing the political engagement of youth regardless of education levels. Notably, however, high participation in the political activities measured here was rare across our entire sample, which is not surprising given previously documented declines in many traditional types of civic indicators across historical time (Putnam 2000).

In this study, differing findings for political activities and voting suggest that the type of civic participation may be important for understanding historical patterns of social inequality in youth civic engagement. In addition to interaction effects, our results support the well-documented social class gap in civic engagement. As other research has implied, inequalities are stubbornly persistent for certain types of civic engagement, whereas educational disparities are increasing for other types such as voting (Syvertsen et al. 2011). A limitation of our study is that we could not assess nonpolitical or newly emerging types of civic engagement; future research should explore a broader array of civic behaviors to better understand youth participation and the extent of growing versus stable or decreasing social inequalities across various forms. Another limitation is that our analyses did not account for potential changes in voting ages by states over historical time;

empowers all youth and particularly those in disenfranchised groups (Levinson 2010). Postsecondary institutional supports, such as the AmeriCorps national service program, may be a promising avenue for establishing voting habits and increasing civic commitments in diverse groups of youth as they transition to adulthood (Finlay, Flanagan, and Wray-Lake 2011). Whatever the set of solutions, researchers, policy makers, and everyday citizens need to work toward redressing these persistent and growing threats to democracy. ■

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