**Civic Engagement Research Project**

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**Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement is engaging in activities that promote the values and people of the community through both political and non-political processes. It can also be defined as the participation of people in activities in their communities that lead to the development of individuals within the community or the community as a whole. Political and civic engagements involve activities such as voting and partisan advocacy. On the other hand, civic engagement as community service emphasizes participation in voluntary activities for the benefit of one's local community. This paper discusses the levels of civic engagement in the United States, focusing on youth and older adult engagement. It identifies the available literature on the same, noting research gaps and formulating strategies to promote civic engagement amongst the American population.

**History of Civic Engagement**

Before the term "community engagement" was even defined, engagement already existed. The civic engagement movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which encouraged individuals to actively participate in their communities and advance democracy by boosting citizen involvement in problem-solving and enhancing access to social and political capital, helped the idea become widely accepted (Mills). Before, it was believed that the government's job was to make decisions and "fix" societal problems. Still, in recent years, it has become more commonplace for the government to interact with the populace by educating and consulting with citizens on issues that affect them. This led to additional demands for participation from the government, institutions of higher learning, healthcare organizations, and others.

In the history of the United States, democracy has always required hands-on input from all citizens. In the 1960s, civic engagement became more common as people fought for their rights and freedoms as dictated by the Constitution of the United States (Nokes). Individuals thus participated in protests and marches to fight for such rights. Such actions were early signs of civic engagement and led to the term's rise.

**Impact of Civic Engagement**

**For Democracy**

Individuals have high stakes in making decisions that shape a country's direction. All issues that affect the country affect each individual directly or indirectly. For instance, issues to do with education, healthcare, immigration, gun policies, and environmental issues affect every citizen. Civic engagement provides a voice for the individuals to help dictate how such issues are addressed. Participation thus creates a valuable perspective on issues and allows individuals to participate in the process of shaping their future. Exclusion from civic engagement, therefore, undermines democracy as issues are not solved for the people and by the people (Eimhjellen). The few that participate in civic matters decide whether it favors the general public or not.

**For the community**

People and their contributions are integral to the development of their local communities. They shape the culture of the community and also shape its social connectedness. Individuals within the community experience issue firsthand and, therefore, should be at the front line of activism to deal with community issues. Civic engagement, therefore, has a positive impact on the development of the community in that individuals can stand up against matters that destroy the community's values, morals, and culture. Communities grow stronger and more resilient when their members participate in civic engagement.

**For equity**

The United States is faced with challenges of inequalities based on characteristics such as race, gender, social class, and disabilities, among other factors. That prevents the communities and the country as a whole from thriving. A cause for such inequality is underrepresentation in political and social life due to elements of oppression and marginalization. Civic engagement eliminates such representation, giving marginalized individuals due to various characteristics a voice. It promotes a more equitable and just society.

**Literature Review**

**Concept of civic engagement**

The various meanings of civic engagement are identified in the works of Adler and Goggin. It can mean engagement in community service, public service, or the social sphere aimed at improving the well-being of the society or community. According to one of the definitions by Berger, civic engagement is not necessarily political participation. It is not specific to terms such as social volunteering, connectedness, or community spirit. It is an umbrella term that entails all the terms without specifically referring to a single one. Another scholar, Jacoby, focuses on the concepts of civic engagement, focusing on higher education. The author, in her book, identifies the background and fundamentals of civic engagement. They identify that the term could be applied to individuals and also institutions.

**Youth and civic engagement**

Many researchers have tried to understand the levels of civic engagement in the United States and among different populations. They research the various ways of promoting civic engagement and modern tools and technologies that can promote such engagement, especially among the youth. Pang et al. focus their article on understanding the role of social media in promoting civic engagement among the youth. The authors identify their primary goal of reviewing available literature to clarify the association between social media and civic engagement. They conducted a systematic review of 42 articles published between 2010 and 2019. They also design a theoretical framework based on citizen participation and computer-mediated communication, as the literature identifies. The authors prove that social media could positively correlate with civic engagement among the younger generation. The research also identifies certain features of social media, such as the use of technology for news and expression, to predict its impact on civic participation.

Scholars outside the United States support the use of social media and digital technologies to promote civic engagement. Zhu et al. further study the participation of youth in political matters as a means of strengthening democracy. The authors identify social media use in the digital era as a strategy that receives inadequate attention. The study is based on data collected from a sample of individuals based in Hong Kong and used to evaluate the role of political expression and its link to social media use. The results show creative social media users positively correlate to political participation. The findings support the theoretical contribution that links social media to civic engagement.

Adler and Goggin focus their paper on the definition of civic engagement, explaining the various meanings that exist. They identify civic engagement as the way through which members of the community are involved in activities that help others and shape the community's future. The article further explores civic engagement in the United States. It compared the engagement between the youth population and the older adults in the country. The attempt to measure the levels of civic engagement led to the findings that the youth are more involved in civic engagement compared to older individuals. Older individuals, on the other hand, are more involved in certain dockets, such as politics. The authors complete their article by recommending various ways of promoting civic engagement among older adults. Community service programs, changing the paradigm of aging, and building pathways to engagement are some of the recommendations the authors give for increasing civic engagement in the older population.

McClain and Fleming take a different angle to understand civic engagement in the United States. Their aim is on what could be done to promote such engagement among the youth and the American population in general. Their article argues for the importance of civic education as a remedy to the 'constitutional rot' and challenges of polarization and growing diversity in the United States. The authors advocate for reflective patriotism as the best way of civic education. They argue that the model encompasses love for the country with a clear view of the successes and failures that chart a path toward success. The civic education approach helps learners engage with painful and' hard histories' of inclusion and exclusion to help promote social belonging. It educates the learners to hold steadfast to constitutional democracy.

**Methodology**

The project data was obtained through an extensive literature review of available resources discussing civic engagement. All literature that was based on civic education and civic engagement among the youth was added to the study. The study articles were retrieved from online databases such as Google Scholar, Emerald Journal, and ScienceDirect. The findings were classified into themes that helped create a better understanding of civic engagement among youth populations in the United States.

**Discussion**

Civic engagement is part of the 'good citizen' agenda, where all citizens of the country are expected to participate in activities that help develop the community. Research, however, shows a steady decline in civic engagement amongst the American population, both young and old, compared to several decades ago. Many individuals find it less interesting to engage in civic activities, and many others have little to no idea of their role as citizens or their responsibilities in civic engagement.

One of the major themes discussed in the research article is the difference in civic engagement between youths and older adults. Older adults are more into civic activities that are related to politics, but that is almost all. Unlike the youth, the older generations have been neglected, and more focus is on the youth through many of the programs aimed at promoting civic engagement. For instance, programs such as community engagement are made compulsory in most cases for youth, especially those that are in higher institutions (Wray-Lake, 270-82). In many cases, such engagements contribute to certain percentages in their overall qualifications to graduate or participate in other activities in their academic journey.

Many authors show that the civic health of a nation can be measured through several dimensions, such as social and political trust and also through the electoral process. It is also identified through the attitudes individuals have towards bearing the moral conditions of the community. In relation to that, many Americans believe that the country is morally weaker than years before, and that leads to people that are less inclined to build trust within politics and factions in society.

Education is critical to civic engagement in the United States. However, the levels of education amongst the most vulnerable communities have been on a steady decline. For instance, African Americans and Latino populations that fail to get access to the necessary and appropriate formal education drop out of formal political life and life around community-oriented activities. The same is true for vulnerable white counterparts.

**Promoting Civic Engagement**

Based on the findings and discussions, promoting civic engagement in the United States requires more attention. The following are some of the ways to encourage civic engagement among the youth and also the older adults:

**Improving civic literacy**

Civic education is one of the best ways to affect the attitudes that people have toward their societies and their responsibilities in such societies. Reinvigorating civic education in the K-12 system and also incorporating it in adult education changes the views the next generation has on civic engagement. It teaches future generations how governments affect their lives at all levels and, thus, ways they can improve it (McClain and Fleming). Including civic education in the curriculum will ensure that every youth and child has an idea of how they can champion their local, state, and federal governments and the importance of the same. It also teaches them the importance of community engagement and community-building efforts, allowing them to connect such activities with personal stories and experiences.

**Include the youth in leadership**.

Young people also have a voice in matters that affect them in society. For instance, young people in the United States have been vocal about their ideologies on climate change and more direct matters such as gun safety. It is thus important to seek their perspectives at all levels of governance. It helps build a sense of responsibility which eventually promotes participation in civic activities such as voting for new leaders and addressing community issues.

**Strengthen the trust in societal institutions and government**.

Many individuals, young and old, fail to participate in civic practices due to a lack of faith in the system. They believe that their opinions and preferences do not matter. Political issues such as corruption and scandals in the past prevent people from fully participating in community growth activities. Social institutions that are more transparent and accountable would increase trust and thus promote increased civic engagement (Liu and Wenqin).

**Tap into digital media to promote civic engagement.**

Digital media has become the norm in people's lives, and they are almost in every aspect of the life of an individual. The digital media landscape is based on the availability and sharing of information that is of importance to those using the technology. Information on civic engagement could thus be shared through social media as a way of motivating users to participate in civic activities.

**Community service programs**

They are programs that the government runs at all levels and jurisdictions with the aim of increasing civic engagement. They are most appropriate for the older generation that is neglected in promoting community engagement and civic responsibility (Adler and Goggin).

**Conclusion**

Civic engagement is a crucial element in creating a better American society. The study provides an overview of civic engagement amongst the youth and older adult populations in the United States. The results show declining interest amongst all the groups due to the lack of promoting civic engagement in social contexts. Viewing civic engagement in different dimensions helps develop appropriate strategies that are employed t increase engagement. Strategies such as education and tailored program development help improve the country's civic engagement levels. However, more research in the topic area is necessary.

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