

Civic Engagement and Educational Progress in Young Adulthood

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Education beyond high school is generally considered important for access to good jobs and is also a route to civic incorporation. Many young people, however, face challenges to obtaining education and engaging as active citizens. Our analysis of national longitudinal data shows that there is a relationship between educational progress and civic engagement for young adults. Those who make academic progress over a four-year period during their young adult lives are more likely to vote, to volunteer, to use media for information about current events, and to desire to contribute to the common good than those who do not make academic progress. These relationships held for young adults from disadvantaged (families earned less than \$40,000 per year) and advantaged backgrounds.

The data are drawn from a longitudinal study of young adults with an interest in community service. Participants were either AmeriCorps¹ State and National members or comparison group members (investigated but did not join AmeriCorps)² and the survey is designed to represent all full-time first-year AmeriCorps members. The sample (N = 1,666) was ethnically and socioeconomically diverse with 60% of individuals from families earning less than \$40,000 per year (the median income during the year of data collection). The ethnic/racial composition of the sample was 14.1% Hispanic, 4.7% Multiracial, 1.6% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4.0% Asian, 21.4% Black/African American, 0.8% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 53.4% White.

Overall, four forms of civic engagement and attitudes were positively linked with educational progress, regardless of whether one's family of origin earned more or less than the median income (all results reported were statistically significant).

Voting. Young people who made educational progress over four years were more likely to vote than those who made no educational gains. Figure 1 shows the voting rate for those who made progress ("achieved") and those who did not ("static") at two points in time (W1 and W3) from families who earned less than the median income. The voting gap was seen at the beginning of the study and four years later and applied to

¹ Details of the larger AmeriCorps study are summarized in reports prepared for the Corporation for National and Community Service (2004; 2008).

² All AmeriCorps and comparison group members were combined in analyses.

individuals from disadvantaged and advantaged families. The positive relationship between voting and educational attainment is consistent with previous research. The unique findings reported here are: First, that this positive relationship was found for young people from less as well as more advantaged backgrounds. Second, that the group who made educational progress over the four years of the study were more likely than their peers who made no progress to vote at the beginning and at the end of the study.

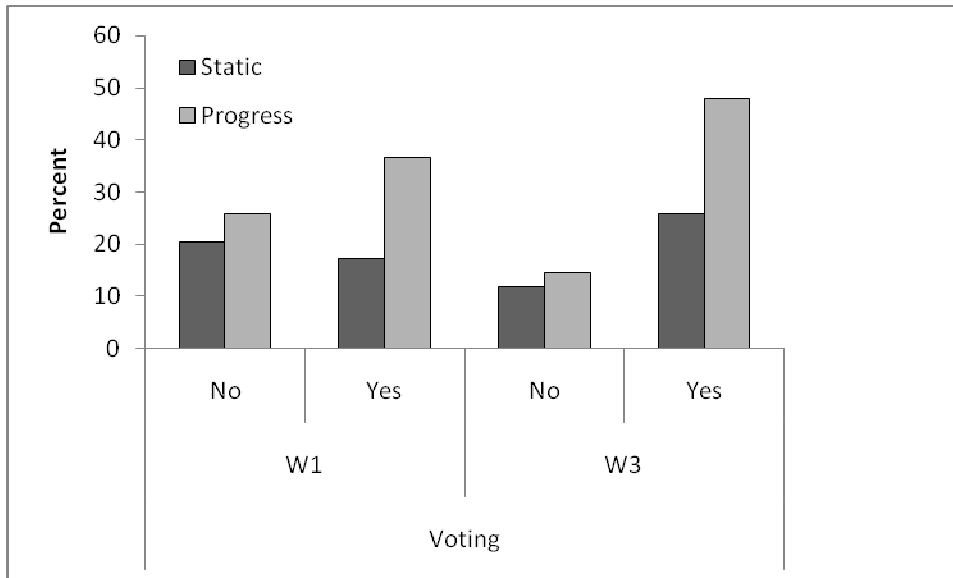


Figure 1. Relationship of voting at Wave 1 and Wave 3 and educational progress over four years for youth whose families earned less than the median income.

Volunteering. The same pattern was observed for volunteering: those who made educational progress were more likely to volunteer at the beginning and end of the study (Wave 1 and Wave 3). Figure 2 shows the results for youth whose families earned less than the median income. In other words, youth from more advantaged backgrounds made educational progress over four years regardless of whether they were involved in volunteer service or not. However, for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, sustained engagement in volunteer service was positively related to the likelihood that they would progress with their educations over the four year period.

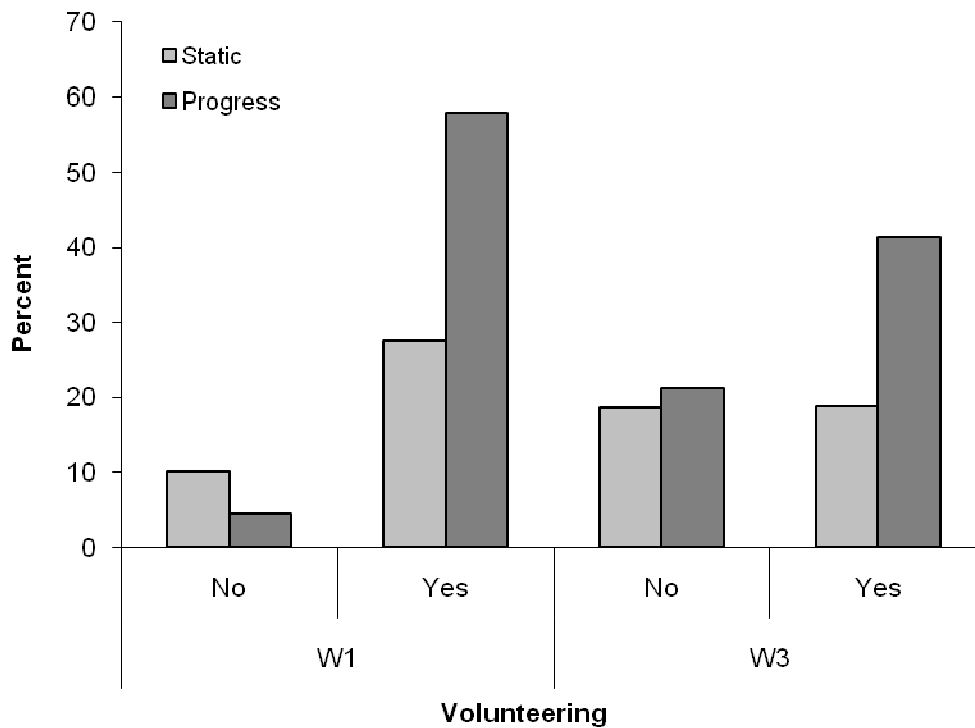


Figure 2. Relationship of volunteering at Wave 1 and Wave 3 and educational progress over four years for youth whose families earned less than the median income.

Civic media use. Use of the media for civic purposes was also related to educational progress. Youth who reported that they used email or the Internet for information on current events were more likely to obtain more education over four years. In contrast, youth who made no educational progress were more likely to report that they never accessed the media for civic purposes. Again, these results were true regardless of the income level of one's family.

Figure 3 plots the civic media use for respondents with fewer financial resources. It shows that although most young adults report utilizing email or the Internet for information on current events, those who never access the media are disproportionately comprised of individuals who make no educational progress. There may be many reasons for this correlation. For example, young adults may not be in settings with easy access to computers (e.g., not in classrooms or libraries that have computers) or they may be trying to handle work or other responsibilities and do not have time to engage in civic media use or they may be less interested in current events. (N.B. Civic media use was asked at Wave 3 only.)

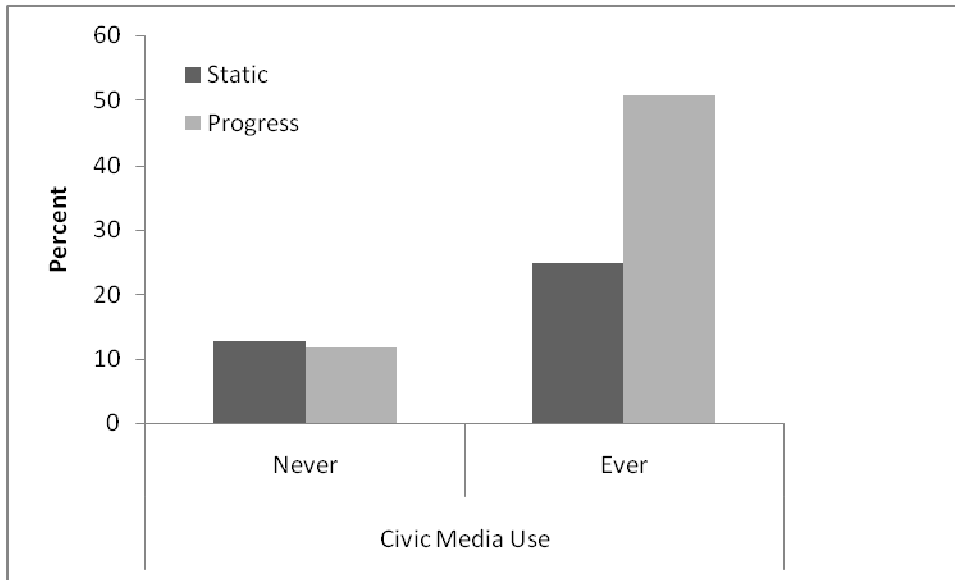


Figure 3. Civic media use and educational progress at Wave 3 for young adults whose families earn less than median income.

Civic Attitudes. The pattern of civic attitudes is similar to the patterns for the other civic behaviors: Respondents in the educational *progress* group were more likely to say that contributing to the greater good (i.e., serving their community and a desire to reduce inequality) were relevant to why they investigated AmeriCorps. This was true for individuals whose families had fewer financial resources as well as for those who had more financial resources. Figure 4 is limited to individuals with fewer financial resources. This shows that, for those who made educational progress over the four years of the study, reducing inequality was a moderately or very important motivation for their looking into AmeriCorps. In contrast, for those who made no educational progress (the *static* group), reducing inequality was a less important reason for why they investigated AmeriCorps. The same pattern of results was exhibited for the civic attitude of serving one’s community, i.e., regardless of financial resources, those young people who made educational progress over the four years were more likely than peers who did not to say that serving their community was an important reason why they had investigated AmeriCorps. In summary, there were stronger “common good” motivations for investigating AmeriCorps reported by those young people who made educational progress. (N.B. Civic attitudes were asked at Wave 3 only.)

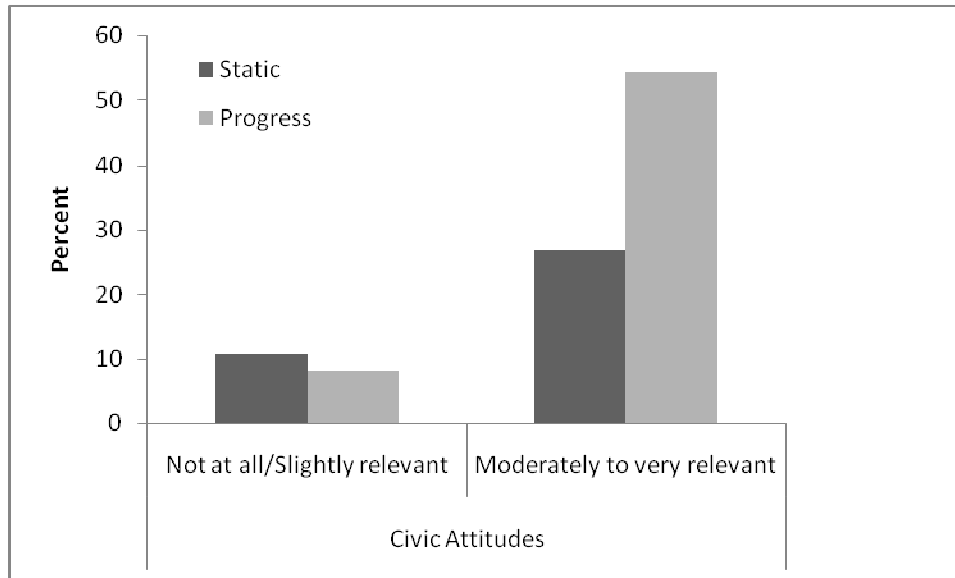


Figure 4. Percentage of respondents at Wave 3 whose families earned less than median income who value contributing to the common good through a desire to reduce inequality.

Discussion

Examining the demographic characteristics of disadvantaged respondents reveals that individuals who did not make educational progress over four years were, by and large, dealing with several factors that impede educational progress. For example, among those whose families earned less than the median income, youth who did not make educational progress (21.6%) were more likely to be divorced (2.4%) at the end of the study and more likely to have children at both the beginning (13.9%) and the end (17.1%) of the study. Having young children at Waves 1 (4.5%) or 3 (6.6%) also impeded the educational progress of the group of young adults whose parents earned more than median income. Undoubtedly, having young children poses demands on time and financial resources. Scheduling classes and completing homework assignments compete for time and energy with child care responsibilities.

Educational progress also varied by the respondent's race/ethnicity. Among youth whose families earned less than median income, Hispanics, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and African American/Black made less educational progress than other ethnic groups. In the group whose families earned more than median income, Hispanics and African American/Blacks also made less educational progress.

Although the study cannot tell why civic engagement and educational attainment are related for young adults, there are several possible explanations. First, there may be basic differences between those who make educational progress and those who do not. For example, respondents who made educational progress over the four years may be more motivated to learn and to get civically engaged. The fact that they also report higher civic engagement may mean that they also are motivated to contribute to the common good by voting, volunteering, or staying informed about public affairs. The fact that they were civically engaged throughout the four years – rather than episodically, i.e., at one time but not at another – points to a pattern of sustained civic engagement.

Second, they may have been spending more time in educational settings where they could access or get recruited into civic activity and where their interest in current events was encouraged. It also is possible that by staying civically engaged, they were apprised of educational opportunities or connected to adults who could help them navigate the process of applying and paying for education or to others who encouraged their educational aspirations.

There has long been a stubborn relationship between social class and civic participation and education plays an important role in this relationship. Research with older adults shows that education has multiple direct and indirect effects on civic participation.³ For young adults, there may be civic advantages of being in educational settings because of the resources, recruitment possibilities, and normative pressures for civic engagement. In addition, sustained civic involvement such as volunteer service may be a means whereby young adults (especially those who grew up with fewer advantages) are encouraged to continue their education and helped with navigating hurdles to educational progress.

Future research should delve more deeply into the opportunities for social connection and social capital formation that sustained civic engagement might afford and the potential of such engagement for enabling the educational achievement of young adults.

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³ Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.