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## Civic involvement across the life course: Moving beyond age-based assumptions



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### ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines factors which, over time and context, are linked to civic involvement for individuals, age groups, and cohorts. We begin by critiquing current age- and cohort-related civic involvement canons and norms by extracting and evaluating rationales for why such activity in two particular periods of life—early adulthood and old age—is assumed to be good for individuals and for society. Then, employing elements of a life course perspective, we consider an alternative approach to civic involvement—one that emphasizes dynamic trajectories and the significant degree of variability within individuals, age groups and cohorts resulting in a very different set of assumptions about individual choice and activity. We close by discussing the utility of this alternative approach for research, policy, and practice regarding civic involvement.

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## 1. Introduction

There are two common normative assumptions about citizenship in modern Western democracies. The first is that *all* citizens should aim to be “good citizens,” for their own good and that of society, and the second is that being a “good citizen” means being *civically informed and involved* throughout adult life. There are some strong reasons for this enduring view, including its centrality to the management and survival of democracy, the enhancement of political equity across populations, and the promotion of a more interactive relationship among citizens and between citizens and social and political institutions (see, for example, Dalton, 2008; Denters, Gabriel & Torcal, 2007; Heater, 2004; Siriani & Friedland, 2005; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

Among researchers, policy-makers, and program implementers alike, attention to civic involvement<sup>2</sup> has focused particularly on two distinct periods of life: (1) youth and young adulthood, and (2) old age, as well as on the cohorts now in those age groups. As we will show, each of these age-based foci comes with its own canon, replete with assumptions, norms, and justifications. The reliance on age as a central lens for understanding civic involvement has led to primarily disconnected bodies of work on these two periods of life and occluded the many causes and consequences of trajectories of civic participation over the life course.

We begin by extracting and critically evaluating what are often implicit rationales for why civic involvement in youth and young adulthood and in old age is good for individuals and for society, and we consider some resulting concerns about age and cohort. Our exposition starts with late life because the foundation it establishes offers some provocative points of contrast to youth and young adulthood. We show, however, that these age-specific canons are unduly exclusive in their focus on distinct age groups. Moreover, we find that the rationale for this

exclusivity is based on questionable or overly generalized assumptions about age and life stage, and particularly about the availability, willingness, and obligation of young and old people to be civically involved.

We then describe an alternative approach to understanding civic involvement—one that emphasizes civic trajectories *across* age and time and acknowledges the considerable variability in civic involvement *within* individuals and among age and cohort groups. These emphases lead to a very different set of assumptions and rationales regarding whether, how, and when civic involvement is undertaken. This includes the reality that, regardless of age, civic involvement is likely to be highly dependent upon individual characteristics and personal histories as well as on the larger social, economic, and historical contexts in which individuals are embedded. We conclude by describing some of the implications of this alternative approach for future research and for reorienting policy and programmatic objectives related to civic involvement. We also provide some examples of this alternative approach in these realms.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Traditional age-based perspectives: old age and youth

### 2.1. Late life as a period for civic involvement: age-specific issues

The view of late life civic involvement is dominated by justifications and norms related to age and cohort. As we will show, these have been used to frame a new narrative about late-life civic involvement that promotes strong normative expectations that: (1) The older population, now a veritable treasure trove of resources, *should be* involved in activities directed at civic outcomes for the well-being of community and society; (2) Moreover, in old age, with its attendant availability for such activity, older people *should want to be and choose to be* civically involved;

<sup>2</sup> Terms referring to the elements of citizenship, such as “civic engagement,” “civic participation,” and “good citizenship” are numerous, sometimes variable or overlapping in conceptual scope, or questionably measured (for extended discussions of these issues, see, for example, Greenfield, 2010, chap. 1; Kaskie, Imhof, Kavanaugh & Culp, 2008; Morrow-Howell, 2010; Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). We instead use the term “civic involvement” to capture three basic domains: (1) *civic knowledge* (e.g., a basic understanding of government structure, process, and outcomes, such as law and policy); (2) *political activity* (e.g., behavior related to electoral politics and the expression of political voice, such as voting, writing to congressional representatives); and (3) *civic activity* (e.g., non-partisan and primarily voluntary activity in a geographic level or jurisdiction, such as addressing community issues or problems, or fund-raising for charities).

<sup>3</sup> In these literatures, “old age” traditionally has been tied to eligibility criteria for old age programs, such as Social Security, rather than social definitions. Some of the literature on civic involvement in “late life” starts its inquiry as early as 55, but most pick up the view at 65 and/or demarcate “young-old” or “old-old” categories, which are often bracketed as 65–74 and 75+. An exposition of the varied and often contested meanings and markers of “old age” cannot be made here but can be found elsewhere (see Settersten & Trauten, 2009). Similarly, “adulthood” is often construed to begin at the common legal ages of 18 or 21, but scholarship on young adulthood keeps in its view the 20s and even the early 30s, given that much of the relevant action related to traditional markers of adulthood (such as leaving home, finishing school, finding work, partnering, and parenthood) and the social and psychological autonomy of young people today is occurring on the upper end of that band (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Settersten & Ray, 2010b).

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