



# Uniters or dividers? Voluntary organizations and social capital acquisition<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Many voluntary civic groups such as churches, neighborhood organizations, and recreation clubs are segregated by status dimensions such as social class. As a result, they may preferentially foster social network ties among in-group members while excluding outsiders, thereby reinforcing social capital deficits among low status actors. However, to the extent that civic groups bring together diverse members from across a variety of status dimensions, these organizations can expand and strengthen network ties and foster heterogeneous social capital resources for those who participate. This study uses nationally representative data in the United States and the position-generator social capital instrument to investigate these issues. Analyses draw on several summary measures of individual social capital, as well as an innovative multilevel dyadic analysis constructed from position-generator responses. Results suggest that civic participation largely mediates the relationship between ego's social position and access to social capital resources. Additionally, civic participation is associated with stronger ties to high status alters.

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## 1. Introduction

Social capital refers to the resources embedded in one's social network—social contacts that provide access to information, influence, or status (Bourdieu, 2001; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998). These resources aid in a variety of actions ranging from getting a job (Granovetter, 1974), gaining promotions (Burt, 2004), and starting an entrepreneurial venture (Kwon et al., 2013). Advantageous social capital results from having access to diverse and influential social contacts. Accessing contacts across variety of positions of power and influence can provide resources that facilitate instrumental action (Lin, 2001). Social capital is particularly important to the status attainment process because diverse

and influential contacts often yield resources that are inaccessible through more locally constrained networks (Erickson, 1996; Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 1999).

Social groups have unequal access to social capital resources (Campbell et al., 1986; Lin, 1999). Lower status individuals are presumed to suffer deficits in the extent and quality of the resources embedded in their social networks. Lower status individuals also tend to have weaker relationships with high status contacts (Lin and Dumin, 1986). These social capital deficits, in turn, constrain social mobility outcomes relative to more advantaged others. Considerable research indicates that social capital deficits are at least partly due to homophily in social network formation: preferential attachment between individuals who are socially similar across a number of status dimensions such as race, education, occupation, and social class (McPherson et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2014; DiPrete et al., 2011).

However, social capital deficits also occur due to unequal opportunities to interact with in-group and out-group members (Blau, 1977a, 1977b). An ecological view of network formation highlights how networks form and evolve within organized settings that contextualize mechanisms such as homophily (Feld, 1981; McFarland et al., 2014). Ties, particularly to non-kin, often form because of joint activities within organized settings, such as religious organizations, political groups, and community or leisure organizations. On the one hand, these civic organizations may facilitate network homogeneity. These organizations are often informally segregated

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by salient social categories and status dimensions and in turn facilitate interaction among socially similar individuals (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987; Popielarz, 1999; Popielarz and McPherson, 1995). On the other hand, some scholars argue that voluntary civic organizations foster social integration among members of a community and may actually reduce network homogeneity (Babchuk and Edwards, 1965; Glanville, 2004). To the extent that these organizations promote joint activities among diverse members, they may play an important role in reducing social capital deficits for those at the bottom.

The present study investigates how civic participation and engagement with voluntary membership organizations, such as social clubs, religious organizations, and community groups, affects social capital acquisition. While most prior research on social networks and civic participation focuses on close relationships (Glanville, 2004; Marsden, 1987, 1988; McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987), these earlier studies offer only limited explanation for social capital acquisition where access to diverse and high status reaching acquaintanceship networks are particularly important (Lin, 1999). Perhaps more importantly, these studies are unable to examine whether participation in voluntary civic organizations mediates the relationship between individual status characteristics and social capital resources. As a result, we still know little about how unequal access and participation in voluntary organizations may affect social capital deficits. To overcome these limitations, I analyze nationally representative data on adults in the U.S. that uses a “position generator” approach to measuring individuals’ social capital. The strategy gathers information about how survey respondents’ friends and acquaintances are embedded in the occupational hierarchy and can be used to construct summary measures of respondents’ networks: the diversity of accessed occupations and the status of accessed occupations (Lin et al., 2001). Drawing on the position-generator, this study links participation in voluntary civic organizations and the kinds of network resources of interest to many scholars of social capital and mobility (Lin, 1999; Lin and Ao, 2008).

Results suggest that civic organizations may provide the social foci where individuals can form personal networks that reach a diverse array of occupations positioned throughout the occupational hierarchy. Findings also suggest that participation in voluntary organizations helps account for social capital deficits associated with socioeconomic status. In particular, analyses reveal that participation in civic organizations helps explain educational, income, and SEI based differences in ego-network diversity and alter prestige. Civic participation also helps strengthen relations to high status contacts, even for actors in relatively low status positions. These results contribute evidence for an ecological explanation of social capital deficits as unequal access and participation in voluntary civic organizations help account for social capital inequalities.

The article proceeds with a theoretical discussion of the links between social capital deficits and civic participation followed by a description of empirical expectations about how voluntary civic organizations affect social capital acquisition. Next, I describe the data and analytic strategy used in the study before presenting results showing that civic participation predicts (1) greater access to occupations through friends and acquaintances (versus family, coworkers, and neighbors), (2) greater network diversity, and (3) greater access to prestigious contacts. Additionally, results from an innovative dyadic analysis of the position generator survey instrument reveal that civic participation predicts (4) stronger ties to high status occupations. Results support the proposition that civic participation fosters social capital acquisition and social capital deficits may be partially due to differential rates of civic engagement. I conclude by discussing limitations and directions for future work.

## 2. Background

Civic participation is a central aspect of modern social life that has attracted considerable social science inquiry. Tocqueville (1840) suggested that civic organizations in the nineteenth century U.S. were essential for the success of participatory democracy because they fostered a vibrant civic life and political engagement. Following this tradition, contemporary research describes the collective benefits associated with healthy civic participation and laments the consequences of declining voluntary group memberships (Putnam, 1995, 2000). At the national level, Paxton (2002) finds that widespread participation in voluntary civic associations is linked to a healthy liberal democracy and argues that these organizations support citizens’ democratic engagement. At the individual level, Son and Lin (2008) find that participation in civic organizations increases the tendency to sign petitions, attend political rallies, and participate in demonstrations or marches. The authors suggest that membership in voluntary civic organizations encourages individuals to “improve the status quo of either a community or a broader social entity” (Son and Lin, 2008:337) through civic action.

While civic and voluntary organizations may be important for collective outcomes, evidence that these organizations support individual network diversity is more mixed (Glanville, 2004; Magee, 2008; Popielarz, 1999). On the one hand, civic organizations can bring diverse members into a single setting, thereby fostering more heterogeneous social networks as well as network ties that bridge salient social cleavages. On the other hand, civic organizations are often marked by status characteristics, such as social class, and as a result may primarily promote homogenous ties. Marsden’s (1987, 1988) work with the GSS name generator measure shows that American’s core discussion networks tend to be homogeneous on a number of status dimensions, including education and race, but having a high number of discussion partners drawn from voluntary organizations does not improve network diversity (Marsden, 1990). Similarly, using the Detroit Area Study, Fischer et al. (1977) report that men who draw their best friends from voluntary organizations exhibit more social class homogeneity in their networks than men who draw contacts from family or work.

It may be that organizational characteristics determine whether these settings improve or constrain individual network diversity (Popielarz, 1999). Glanville (2004) shows that organizational location is particularly important for the formation of diverse friendships and discussion networks. Analyzing data from the Pittsburgh Neighborhood Study, she finds that membership in organizations located within respondents’ neighborhoods reinforces network homogeneity while organizations located outside of the respondent’s neighborhood enhance network diversity. In a study of close friendships in ten towns in Nebraska, McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1987) report that voluntary organizations with more heterogeneous membership profiles tend to improve opportunities to form close bonds with a diverse set of individuals but only when those organizations are relatively small in size. Larger organizations permit members to make homophilous friend choices, even if the settings include a diverse membership. The authors conclude that many people homophilously choose their close friends even if relatively diverse organized social groups offers an opportunity to bond with heterogeneous alters (McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987:370).<sup>1</sup>

These earlier studies primarily explore how civic participation affects diversity versus homogeneity in respondents’ closest

<sup>1</sup> McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1987) call this “choice homophily” where actors will prefer homophilous ties even if the composition and opportunity structure of the social group offers opportunities to form ties with heterogeneous alters.

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