



Civic Wealth: A Framework for Understanding Civic Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Efforts to increase civic engagement and political participation are in full gear to help influence the upcoming 2018 elections. To maximize our effectiveness, we need a new framework and paradigm. Civic engagement and political participation cannot be “mobilized” by sporadic, election-oriented efforts. Instead we must develop strategies that take into account the outcome of historical processes and institutions that have incentivized and facilitated participation for some communities and not others.

Increasing amounts of money are being spent on voter mobilization across demographics and political ideologies, and numerous organizations are working hard to ensure voter disenfranchisement and suppression, which disproportionately affects Black and Brown communities, comes to an end. Nonetheless, there have been no dramatic increases in civic participation, particularly among those least likely to engage—very low income individuals and families, and Black and Brown communities who don’t see themselves or their needs represented in the current political system.

Moreover, when these communities do participate, they often still end up with limited options among candidates, candidates who do not advocate or support public policies that truly address their most pressing needs – economic security and mobility, decriminalization of poverty, and policies that help establish dignity and a sense of worth.

The Cook Center for Social Equity at Duke University and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, among others, have been unpacking a better, more comprehensive picture of how the economy functions in the United States by focusing on racial wealth inequality. Stratification economics allows a better understanding of the ways economic inequality functions in the United States, revealing how individual decisions are far from the only factor at work, and demonstrating the powerful role of race, segregation, and public policy (Hamilton and Darity 2017; Hamilton et al. 2015; Hamilton et al. 2011). Political science in general, and our understanding of civic engagement in particular, could benefit from this analysis by drawing on some of the same key concepts with a decided focus on power, influence, and governance. Civic wealth provides a foundation for a *structural analysis* of political inequality.

From this perspective, we introduce the concept of “civic wealth” which offers a more holistic and complete picture of political engagement and disengagement.¹ In this paper, we initiate an exploration of this concept in hopes of adding to a growing body of work aimed at increasing civic engagement among those most excluded, disenfranchised, and devalued by our current political system.

MEASURES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FAIL TO EXPLAIN PERSISTENT INEQUITIES (ESPECIALLY RACIAL INEQUITY)

Civic engagement matters because we know that public policy—what the government does and does not do (Conway, Ahern, Steurnagel 1995)—is affected by who does and does not participate in polity (Leighly and Nagler 2014; Michener 2016; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Sen 1999). At the same time, existing social and economic inequities—which, in turn, stem from policy choices—significantly affect who participates.

Short-term, small, election-focused positive efforts—like nonpartisan voter registration drives—are unlikely to transform the civic clout of communities that have been intentionally marginalized by policy makers. Indeed, in such places, the most crucial interventions may be those that remove negative impediments (lack of citizenship, felony disenfranchisement, etc.). Otherwise, ill-chosen interventions may lead communities to “run hard to stay in place” without actually getting at core inequities.

Most attempts to reduce political inequality fail.

With the exception of the relatively new strategy of Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE), most reforms meant to increase equity in political participation fall short because they misunderstand the nature of the problem. Such reforms (early voting, voting by mail, same day registration, simple “get out the vote” encouragement drives) may lead to a small upticks in participation, but

¹ There appears to be some literature behind an idea of “civic wealth” relating to political theory and humanistic thought (see Baron 1938), but our concept of the term is completely different.

they also often exacerbate participatory inequality by disproportionately affecting the non-participants who are most similar to their participating counterparts (Schlozman, Brady, Verba, and Shames 2012).

Many election reforms assume that those who do not vote simply lack the time or will to do so, but this is not the full story. Voting and other forms of political participation are the result of a deeper and broader set of structural factors. The failure of scholars and practitioners to correctly diagnose the causes of low levels of civic participation lead to ineffectual prescriptions. The concept of “civic wealth” is a productive corrective.

Existing political science literature primarily focuses on the resources (material and attitudinal) and institutional factors that affect whether and how people participate in politics. For the most part, the emphasis of the discipline is on what we call “civic assets” — the elements of social and economic life that enhance citizenship and enable political engagement (Soss and Weaver 2017).

Civic assets are important, but they are only part of the story of political life in America. Drawing on the broader concept of civic wealth—and using economic wealth as a model—understanding the full story requires attentiveness to both assets *and* liabilities. This dual framework sensitizes us to both the traditional/institutional correlates of political engagement and the stark structural realities of everyday life for the most marginalized Americans.

Liabilities are the crucial and often overlooked aspect of participation. Just as economic wealth is a measure of one’s assets minus one’s liabilities, civic wealth must be understood as civic assets minus civic liabilities. Examples of civic liabilities include factors that actively suppress or otherwise reduce participation like strategic demobilization of particular communities, mass incarceration, felon disenfranchisement, negative views of the possibilities of political activity, and more.

Using the definition of economic wealth as a model,

**“Civic Wealth” = civic assets
*minus civic liabilities***

Just as economic wealth is heritable within families and tied to the wealth of one’s communities, so too is civic wealth something we should measure and view as family- and community-wide rather than just something possessed by atomized individuals.

A NEW MEASURE OF “CIVIC WEALTH” CAN HELP

“Civic wealth” is measurable at both the individual and the group level. To demonstrate this, we chart both sides of the wealth ledger: civic assets *and* civic liabilities. On the one hand, we consider assets such as political knowledge, political efficacy and social networks. On the other hand, we gauge liabilities such as racial segregation, “bad neighborhoods,” economic inequity and voter suppression. Civic wealth is a composite measure that incorporates both assets and liabilities into a single number or score. Table 1 lists some of the factors that we incorporate into the measure.

Table 1. Assets and Liabilities in a Civic Context

ASSETS	LIABILITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Positive political socialization● High sense of efficacy● Relatively high political knowledge● Descriptive representation● Social connectedness/networks● Sense that politics works to solve important problems (“primacy”)● Organizational density● High levels of mobilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Incarceration● Segregation● Stigmatization● Time-constraints● Caregiver responsibility● Economic insecurity● Voter suppression● Domestic violence● Police brutality and other repressive violence● State sponsored finances and fees

More work needs to be done to delineate the conceptual boundaries of civic wealth, making decisions about how to measure each of its components at the individual and community levels, determining the appropriate weights for each component, and identifying appropriate data sources that we can use for creating the measure. Civic wealth is more than a measure of voting, political participation or civic engagement. Civic wealth is a larger set of material, ideational and institutional resources that we hypothesize translate into political power and lead to crucial public policy outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Civic wealth as a concept can help equip scholars, activists, and advocates with knowledge they can use to improve U.S. democratic practices. Once operationalized, we can leverage the concept to shed light on a number of crucial outcomes and processes. Those using the concept can pose and answer questions including:

- What is the relationship between civic wealth and economic wealth?
- How do civic wealth gaps vary across (geographic) communities?
- How do civic wealth gaps vary across demographic groups (race/gender) and at their intersections (race/gender)?
- What material outcomes correlate with civic wealth gaps: do communities fare better when they are equipped with more civic wealth (*ceteris paribus*)?
- What political outcomes correlate with wealth gaps: do communities have their policy interests better represented when they have more civic wealth?
- How can policy reduce civic wealth gaps and promote greater political participation and leadership by women of color (Shames 2017)?
- What kind of governmental, NGO-led, grassroots or hybrid interventions can bring those with low civic wealth a fuller expression of their voice and power?

In addition, the concept of “civic wealth” could be useful to non-academics, especially those working to combat systematic and ongoing recent attempts at strategic demobilization.

Indeed, increasing civic wealth is a potent counterweight to voter demobilization and decreased civic participation. More research needs to be done to further explore this concept. However, simply having new language to explain and describe effective political engagement can be immediately useful for those working in this field, even before more rigorous research begins in earnest.

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