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Civic agriculture and community engagement

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Abstract Several scholars have claimed that small-scale agriculture in which farmers sell goods to the local market has the potential to strengthen social ties and a sense of community, a phenomenon referred to as "civic agriculture." Proponents see promise in the increase in the number of community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, farmers markets, and other locally orientated distribution systems as well as the growing interest among consumers for buying locally produced goods. Yet others have suggested that these novel or reborn distribution mechanisms are still primarily means of instrumental economic exchange and that optimistic characterizations of a renewed sense of community emerging from these practices are unfounded. This study provides an empirical assessment of the extent to which these community-based agriculture markets are associated with connection to community, volunteerism, and civic and political activities. In order to assess the relationship between civic agriculture and community engagement, we surveyed over 1,300 people in the Mid-Hudson region of New York State. The study design includes "civic agriculture participants" as the unit of analysis, defined as CSA farm members, shoppers at independent health food stores, and farmers market patrons. For comparison, a telephone survey of randomly selected residents of the region's general population was also conducted. Unlike studies that focus solely on the perceptions of certain civic agriculture participants (e.g., CSA members), by comparing the perceptions and behaviors of those engaged in a range of civic agriculture practices, we are able to identify the effects of different forms of participation. The results demonstrate higher levels of voluntarism and engagement in local politics among civic agriculture participants relative to the general population. In addition, we found variation among those engaged in different forms of civic agriculture, with those immersed in more socially embedded forms of exchange demonstrating greater community and political involvement. These findings lend empirical support to the civic agriculture thesis.

Keywords Civic agriculture · Civic engagement · Sustainable agriculture · Community supported agriculture · Farmers markets

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Introduction

Across many established measures, the United States has witnessed declines in civic and political engagement over the past century (NCOC 2006; Putnam 2000). In general, Americans are less trusting and feel more removed from their communities. They participate less in formal and informal associations and have low perceptions of personal efficacy, that is, hope of improving their communities. Scholars have sought to understand why this has happened and have tried to identify factors that could reinvigorate civic engagement. Some explanations focus on the decline in social interaction through organizational membership (Putnam 2000), while others have examined the changing nature of social bonds across the range of interactions, from

close relationships to distant public ties (McPherson et al. 2006; Granovetter 1973).

Research focused on changes in economic institutions has connected market structure to this decline in community engagement (Oldenburg 1991; Piore and Sabel 1984; Tolbert 2005). Small locally owned and operated businesses have been replaced in many instances by big national or international corporate entities. These large anonymous enterprises have displaced the network of small business owners who were not only tightly interwoven and highly interdependent themselves, but who also provided venues at which community members could come together and develop social bonds and a sense of trust. Economic exchanges are no longer embedded in a host of social relations that once mediated market activity.

Parallel trends have occurred in the farming sector. While farming was once carried out by mutually dependent small operators who primarily served the local community, agriculture has undergone an industrialization process that has fostered very different social and economic relations (Fitzgerald 2003; Hinrichs 2000; Lobao and Meyer 2001; Lyson 2004). Farms have dramatically increased in size, and the market for agricultural goods is now national or international (Friedland 1994). Agriculture and food processing is now primarily the province of a relatively small number of multinational corporations (Cochrane 1979; Heffernan 1999; Magdoff et al. 2000; Martinez 2007) which sell manufactured food products to other corporations that distribute to the international market. The direct personal social ties and mutual interdependence once found among farmers and rural communities have largely been lost.

Yet, there is some evidence of counter trends. While large farms still dominate the industry, in recent years there has been an increase in small farms both in terms of number and acreage (USDA 2009). Lyson (2004) describes a rebirth of what he refers to as "civic agriculture," agricultural production and distribution methods that offer promise for reinvigorating social ties and a sense of community among producers and consumers. These locally oriented, small-scale agriculture enterprises utilize more traditional farming methods that once again necessitate knowledge of place and the sharing of information among the community of practitioners. Distribution also departs from the industrial model, as farmers connect with consumers through farmers markets, "pick your own" operations, food coops, and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs.

These forms of civic agriculture represent a departure from the industrial food system and show promise in terms of reestablishing social ties and a sense of community that may reinvigorate civic and political engagement. While evidence exists about the effects of small scale enterprises on community ties, there is little empirical data to verify the civic agriculture thesis. Moreover, some analysis and critique suggests that recent forms of civic agriculture fail to live up to early optimistic claims about the rebirth of community through local agriculture (DeLind 1999, 2011; Feagan and Henderson 2009; Pole and Gray 2013). This study offers an empirical examination of whether civic agriculture yields the added social benefits suggested by the concept.

We seek to answer two questions. First, are those who participate in civic agriculture more likely to be engaged in their communities than conventional food buyers, as the civic agriculture thesis suggests? Second, are there differences in levels of community engagement among those involved in different types of civic agriculture? Data was gathered from over 1,300 residents of the Mid-Hudson region of New York State in order to assess these associations. Our results lend support to the idea that local agriculture and the associated networks of food distribution do indeed strengthen communities in a number of ways. While there are some sampling limitations, namely that this study focuses on one region of New York State, the study is unique in that it utilizes data on multiple forms of participation in civic agriculture: CSA membership, patronizing farmers markets, and shopping at independent local food retailers. The results show that, taken together; those engaged in these forms of civic agriculture are more involved with their communities than the general population. In addition, when comparing those engaged in different forms of civic agriculture, community engagement measures correlated in ways that would be expected given the degree of social embeddedness of different market practices. CSA farms, which allow members to purchase shares that entitle them to a portion of the weekly harvest, represent the most socially embedded form of civic agriculture practices, and it is here that we find the strongest positive association with political and civic engagement (Hinrichs 2000). Less socially embedded market exchanges within the civic agriculture spectrum, such as farmers market shopping or buying local produce from an independent retail market, indicate correspondingly less community participation. Yet, all civic agriculture participants are engaged with their communities at higher rates compared with the general public on almost all measures. This is true even when controlling for indicators known to be associated with civic engagement such as age, education, and income (Putnam 2000; Verba et al. 1995). While this study only focuses on certain types of community engagement, based on these common and reliably used measures, we find support for the civic agriculture thesis.

Social bonds and political engagement

Many scholars have sought to understand how social and economic organizations are tied to political engagement and the effective functioning of democratic systems (Oldenburg 1991; Piore and Sabel 1984; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003; Tocqueville 2003; Tolbert 2005). Nearly two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville identified Americans' propensity for participating in associations as contributing to the strength of democracy in the United States (2003). Since that time, numerous studies have provided support for the idea that participating in organizations outside of government is a key feature in democratic societies (Almond and Verba 1963; Cohen and Rogers 1992; Curtis et al. 1992; Habermas 1989; Putnam 1993; Skocpol 2003). Scholars have concluded that the interaction that occurs within varied types of groups fosters knowledge and concern about community (Erickson and Nosanchuk 1990; Verba and Nie 1972), a sense of trust among community members (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Putnam 2000), and communication skills (Brady et al. 1995), all factors that facilitate political participation.

While formal voluntary organizations serve as important "schools of democracy," many scholars have used a more expansive definition of "third places" between work and home at which citizens can come together and form bonds of solidarity and trust (Tolbert 2005). Habermas (1989) documented the importance of coffee houses in the 18th century as providing essential sites for the development of a healthy public sphere. Oldenburg (1991) examined the contemporary importance of small local retail establishments such as cafes, barber shops, and grocery stores where community members could come together and interact and discuss matters of community importance. Despite the lack of a formal structure or membership, these places nonetheless serve as venues through which the bonds of solidarity and trust are established, yielding broader social and political benefits. Piore and Sabel (1984) found that economies based on small, well-integrated firms made for stronger communities that enjoyed greater civic engagement relative to those dominated by large enterprises. Others have come to similar conclusions when considering the agricultural sector, providing evidence that small-scale local agricultural production is associated with greater community well-being (Goldschmidt 1978; Lobao 1990; Lyson et al. 2001; Tolbert et al. 1998). Thus, voluntary organizations are but one means of fostering beneficial social ties; such bonds can also be formed in conjunction with economic activity, including the food and agriculture sector.

Studies that link economic organization, be it the manufacturing, retail, or agricultural sector, with community engagement often focus on the concept of embeddedness—the extent to which market exchanges are mediated by other social ties (Block 1990; Hinrichs 2000; Murdoch et al. 2000). It is possible for actors to carry out exchanges through the market in an anonymous and detached manner. This type of economic relationship is commonplace in modern industrial societies. But business can be conducted in the context of varying degrees of social embeddedness (Block 1990). Individuals may know one another personally or be linked through any number of social relationships that influence the character of the economic activity. This can shape an exchange from one in which anonymous individuals are solely seeking to gain advantage and maximize personal return, to one in which mutual benefit, social support, and community well-being are given greater attention. This is not to suggest that such considerations supersede the economic exchange that is still the primary motivation for these interactions, but the economic activity is mediated to varying degrees by other, non-economic social ties.

Analysts have linked the decline in civic engagement in recent decades to changes in social and economic organization (Barber 1995; Bellah et al. 1996; Putnam 2000). In *Bowling alone*, Robert Putnam argued that in the United States citizens are now less engaged in their communities, evidenced by decreased voter turnout, lower volunteerism rates, and a reduction in memberships in organizations such as political parties, labor unions or sports clubs. Using these measures, this trend has been confirmed by many studies, documenting significant declines in many forms of civic health, including diminished trust in others and a loss of social connections via associations (NCOC 2006).

The decline in organizational participation is paralleled by changes in economic institutions. Economic globalization and the rise of mega retailers and internet marketing have eliminated many of the small manufacturing businesses and retail shops through which community members traditionally came together. Similar processes have occurred in the agricultural sector. A century ago, cities were primarily supplied with food from surrounding farms. Rural communities were fed by local farmers who often provided for their own food and engaged in barter with other proximate residents. Given these social ties, the market aspect of economic exchange was embedded in a host of other social relationships that allowed for community functioning. This is not to suggest that such social systems were wholly inclusive or free of injustice. Indeed, systems of oppression based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other social attributes often prohibited engagement by certain populations or forced them to develop separate social networks. Nonetheless, when examining what types of social and economic organizations facilitated community engagement, researchers have identified clear associations between local economically interdependent communities and high levels of civic and political

engagement relative to communities dominated by large economic entities oriented to the national or international market. Over the past century, this is the manner in which agriculture has developed. Federal policy and economic and technological developments facilitated the growth in the size of farms and fundamentally altered the food system. Emphasis was placed on maximizing production and profitability, fostering an approach that called for the standardization of farm practices (Goss et al. 1980; Lobao and Meyer 2001; Magdoff et al. 2000). Currently, a relatively small number of very large corporations control a significant segment of the agriculture industry, food processing, and wholesale markets (Heffernan 1999). In terms of distribution, these products make their way to consumers through a handful of large supermarkets and mega-retailers (Martinez 2007). Today, as a result of the transition to industrial production and the development of global commodity chains, the autonomy and local knowledge shared by small farmers and the tight integration found among rural communities has diminished (Lyson 2004).

Yet, despite the overall trend toward agricultural industrialization, recent decades have seen a rebirth of small-scale locally oriented food production. Consumer interest in local food and a growth in farmers markets and CSA programs have provided opportunity for community reintegration through agricultural practices (Hinrichs 2000; Jacques and Collins 2003; Schnell 2007). This is what Lyson refers to as "civic agriculture." In contrast to the industrial system built upon neo-classical economic principles:

> Civic agriculture… is a locally organized system of agriculture and food production characterized by networks of producers who are bound together by place… The imperative to earn a profit is filtered through a set of cooperative and mutually supporting social relations. Community problem solving rather than individual competition is the foundation of civic agriculture. (Lyson 2004, pp. 63–64)

Lyson (2004, p. 87) adds that civic agriculture venues can "provide forums where producers and consumers can come together to solidify bonds of community." These forums of civic agriculture serve to re-embed the market exchanges that have become increasingly anonymous and disconnected within the global industrial agriculture system, and the associated personal interactions can rebuild the social capital considered essential to democratic performance.

While some see potential in civic agriculture, others contend that it has not lived up to its promise (DeLind 2011; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; DuPuis et al. 2006). For example, some studies of CSA members have found that traditional instrumental goals still characterize civic agriculture participation. Those who join CSA farms report being more motivated by the opportunity to access fresh organic produce, than by a sense of community or desire to support local farmers (Pole and Gray 2013). DeLind argues that the local food movement, a major force propelling the growing use of civic agriculture venues, has placed too much emphasis on the purchasing of local products and the various distance measures used to define "local." This reduces the act to individual economic behavior that fails to consider the "community building relationships and processes that hold people to place and shared responsibility" (DeLind 2011, p. 275). The message is that purchasing a locally grown product alone is enough, regardless of concerns for equity, place-building, ecological sustainability or other social and political concerns, a critique also offered by other observers (DuPuis and Goodman 2005).

Questions about social justice and charges of elitism have also arisen in both the civic engagement literature (Skocpol 2003; Kwon 2004) and in analyses of food politics (Guthman 2003, 2004a, b; Hinrichs 2000). These are valid concerns, as is the notion that an economic logic ultimately supersedes the community building that is alleged to be integral to civic agriculture. However, these issues must be considered relative to the social relations fostered by the conventional food system to which this movement is reacting. While short of the ideal, it is still possible that civic agriculture venues foster a greater sense of community compared with what is achieved through conventional practices. The instrumental aspect of obtaining food will not disappear from what is still an essential act of exchange, but that does not mean that alternative exchange mechanisms cannot foster stronger social ties than that which one experiences in the supermarket. Additionally, heightened political and civic engagement still leaves open the type of action engaged citizens may undertake. Thus, critics are right to point out that if CSAs are populated by relatively privileged members or if farmers markets cater exclusively to elite consumers, the identity and sense of community fostered may not yield progressive social change. These are all empirical questions, and there is relatively little hard data to ascertain the validity of the claims of civic agriculture proponents or its detractors. While only an initial step, this study seeks to address the gap in the civic agriculture literature that is left by this relative lack of quantitative empirical data and analysis.

Civic agriculture and community engagement: is there a connection?

This study explores, describes, and empirically tests for the presence or absence of positive correlations between

participation in civic agriculture and broader community involvement. Lyson and others make the case that civic agriculture fosters a greater sense of community and strengthens bonds between people. As such, compared with the general population, we should expect to see higher rates of community participation among people involved in civic agriculture. These individuals are expected to be more politically engaged; to be more likely to write letters to the editor of local papers or to legislators, to more closely follow local affairs, and to otherwise be more engaged as citizens. It is also expected that these individuals will be more engaged with general civic activities; that they will be more likely to volunteer, and have a more positive assessment and feel a greater sense of efficacy about bringing change to their communities. All of this should stem from, or at least be reinforced by, the kinds of opportunities created and bonds formed via civic agriculture. While some have argued for a broader conception of both civic agriculture and civic engagement, one that incorporates more abstract notions of "place-making," these typically require in-depth qualitative analysis (DeLind and Bingen 2008). In this study we opt for traditional quantitative measures of community engagement, such as letter writing and volunteerism. More analysis of matters such as identity and sense of place are needed, although we hold that the measurable behaviors and attitudes used here would be highly correlated with any more abstract sense of place used in reference to civic agriculture. Actions, such as volunteering or writing letters, or beliefs, like a sense of efficacy in local affairs, can be manifestations of individuals' deeper sense of belonging and connection to a community.

In addition to hypothesizing that there is a positive relationship between civic agriculture participation and community engagement, we expect that engagement will be greater depending on the "level" of civic agriculture. Researchers have identified that the effects of membership in an organization vary dependent upon particular organizational forms and practices and the extent to which they foster the values, skills, and knowledge that lend themselves to broader engagement (Baggetta 2009; Brady et al. 1995; Skocpol 2003; Skocpol et al. 2000; Verba et al. 1995). While all of the transactions defined as civic agriculture represent a departure from those experienced in the conventional industrial food system (supermarket shopping, food imported from distant locations, etc.), there are identifiable degrees of social embeddedness associated with these different forms of exchange, and this has implications for their role in facilitating community engagement (Hinrichs 2000). Here, in addition to comparing the general public to civic agriculture consumers, we also compare three different types of civic agriculture consumers to one another.

The three forms of civic agriculture we assess are CSA membership, farmers market shopping, and patronizing independently owned health food stores that carry local produce.[1] In all three instances shoppers are having an experience and purchasing products that link them in some way to their community and to regional farming. However, they vary in the extent to which the transaction, the actual market exchange of money for food, is mediated by other social relations among the participants.

CSAs represent the most socially embedded civic agriculture practice (Hinrichs 2000). CSA members or subscribers are, in essence, part owners of the farm enterprise who collectively share the risk of their investment with one another and with the farmer (Janssen 2010). CSAs differ in terms of their particular organizational features (Lyson 2004), but common central elements provide social embeddedness that departs from traditional market relations. First, direct monetary exchange is limited. Subscribers usually purchase a share in the farm in a lump sum, thus there is no ongoing direct monetary exchange during most interactions. Although some arrangements provide for food delivery, more commonly members pick up their food from the farm or from some other centralized location.[2] "Pick-up days" bring CSA members and their farmer(s) together and create the type of social environment that can build ties of solidarity and integrate participants into a community. Members may also be brought together at additional social events associated with the farm, and some CSAs include work opportunities so that members can directly participate in producing their food. Many farms also provide a newsletter with information about the CSA, recipes for how to prepare food items distributed that week, member news, and other relevant community information. Obtaining food through a CSA is, in most cases, a radically different experience from the atomized market exchange that occurs in a conventional supermarket. Given these features, of all the forms of civic agriculture, we hypothesize that CSAs are likely to be associated with the highest levels of civic and political engagement.

Farmers markets represent another venue through which strong bonds of community can be formed. Like CSA pick-up days, they bring people together on a regular, typically weekly, basis. Regular farmers market shoppers are likely

[1] The distinction between these venues may not be perfect in all cases. For example, a CSA program may distribute shares at a farmers market or have other farm venders on hand at a share pick up day at the farm. Many CSA farmers also sell some of their goods to local grocery stores.

[2] In some cases, such as urban CSAs, distribution may take place a considerable distance from the farm, diminishing local ties to place. This may still provide for greater social bonding than occurs through conventional outlets, but because they lack the connection to place, these CSAs are not considered in this study.

to see some of the same people and to establish some connection with the farmers from whom they are purchasing goods. Many farmers markets include music or other entertainment that makes the experience something more than shopping. Ties directly to the land are somewhat more removed relative to CSAs, at least those CSAs at which distribution takes place at the farm; but farmers markets are often held in a town center, so typically there are other forms of community identity building that takes place. Farmers markets vary in the ways in which they are organized, such that the levels of social interaction and the sense of community fostered will also vary. The size of the market, its location (urban vs. rural), rules regarding who can sell goods, the types of goods that can be sold, and ancillary activities such as entertainment or leafleting by community organizations, can all affect the experience of patrons.

However, there are some innate features that make acquiring food at farmers markets a less socially embedded form of exchange relative to CSA membership. Unlike the "shared ownership" and the absence of regular cash exchange that characterize CSAs, farmers markets still include the direct exchange of money for goods, comparative shopping and other elements reflective of traditional self-interested market pursuits (Hinrichs 2000). Thus, overall, while farmers markets are rightly included as a form of civic agriculture, farmers market shopping can be considered a less socially embedded form of exchange than CSA membership. If in fact community engagement is associated with more socially embedded food buying practices, we would expect farmers market shoppers to be less engaged in their communities than CSA members.

Locally owned, independent health food stores that specialize in local foods represent another form of civic agriculture.[3] While further removed from the farm, customers still have some connection to the local agricultural community through the purchase if its products. Shop owners are often present at small independently owned businesses, so customers may form ties with these owners or other employees or possibly with other regular customers. Yet, in other respects, exchange is more similar to that conducted in conventional supermarket shopping, thus, this is best considered the weakest form of civic agriculture, and the least socially mediated of the types examined here. It is hypothesized that relative to CSA members or farmers market shoppers, these consumers will be less engaged in the communities.

[3] Although some national chains, such as Whole Foods or even Walmart, at times carry some locally produced items, we consider only independent retailers as engaged in civic agriculture. The fact that these lines become blurry is the subject of some of the most poignant critiques of civic agriculture in general and the local food movement in particular (e.g., DeLind 2011).

All of these types of civic agriculture consumption can be distinguished from conventional food shopping. Given the size of typical supermarkets, encountering the same employees on a regular basis is less likely, let alone ever meeting an owner or supplier. Most chain supermarkets are incorporated, and major shareholders are unlikely to be present in any given community. Processed foods and even fresh produce are more likely to have been shipped in from distant locations. At best, a product may be labeled with the state or country in which it was grown or manufactured. Supermarket shoppers are unlikely to ever know from whom they are actually purchasing their goods or who actually produced them. It is a market exchange in which each actor is anonymously pursuing their interest; the customer gets a product, the owner(s) make a profit and the workers receive a paycheck. While obviously governed by common social norms that allow such exchanges to occur, in many cases, conversation is limited to the task of purchase and few if any lasting social bonds are created.

Given the degrees of social embeddedness associated with each form of transaction, we sought to test whether civic engagement corresponded with the intensity of social bonds presumed to be fostered via these different venues. Our expectation was that CSA members would display the highest levels of engagement, followed by farmers market shoppers, then local health food store customers and, finally, participants in the conventional food and agriculture industry.

Methods

Study area

The geographic location for this study is four counties (Dutchess, Orange, Sullivan, Ulster) in the Mid-Hudson region of New York State, north of New York City and south of the state capital, Albany. Historically, this region has been particularly important in the state's agricultural landscape, both for the high quality of the soil and its proximity to markets. Similar to trends nationally, many regional farms were lost over the course of the 20th century and those that remain tend to be larger. Also paralleling national trends, recent years have witnessed growth in the number of small farms. In 1910, about three in 10 (31 %) farms in the Mid-Hudson counties were less than 50 acres. But by 2007, this percentage had increased to 43 % (USDA 2009). Looking at the most recent 20 years recorded statewide and in the Mid-Hudson, while the overall number of farms has continued to decline, the proportion of small farms has been increasing. This reflects the growth in small farms oriented toward a local market, as indicated by the increase in CSAs and farmers markets.

Table 1 Comparison of regional CSAs and CSAs sample

	Region		Sample	
	Number	%	Number	%
Total	25	100	10	100
County				
Dutchess	5	20	2	20
Orange	7	28	3	30
Sullivan	2	8	1	10
Ulster	11	44	4	40
Number shares				
1–25	9	36	3	30
26–75	7	28	3	30
76 or more	9	36	4	40
Mean	92		99	
Median	45		50	

A difference of means test shows no significant difference between membership size of all 25 CSAs and the sample of 10 CSAs and non-respondents ($t = .21$, $p = .16$)

New York State has among the highest concentrations of CSAs in the country, and in this region they are particularly plentiful. The region has 5 % of the state's population and an estimated 15 % of its CSAs (US Census 2010). While our study is not nationally generalizable, the size of the sample and the methodology utilized is among the most rigorous deployed for a study on this subject, and it can serve as a model for research to be conducted in other regions. In addition, the comparisons between the different forms of civic agriculture and conventional food buying offer firm grounds for identifying associations between civic agriculture and community engagement.

Sampling and data collection

In order to test for the association between participation in civic agriculture and levels of community engagement, two surveys were conducted. The first was a pen-and-paper self-administered survey of three types of civic agriculture participants: CSA members, farmers markets shoppers, and patrons of locally owned independent health food stores. The second was a general population telephone survey, which provided a comparative sample of conventional food shoppers.

In 2009, there were approximately 350 CSAs in New York State, including over 50 in the four-county study area. To create a sampling frame, a listing was compiled of all 54 CSAs in the region. In order to ensure that the list was comprehensive, we used three publicly accessible online sources: Local Harvest (www.LocalHarvest.org), the Organic Consumers Association (www.OrganicConsumers.org), and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of NY (NOFA-NY, www.nofany.org). CSA farms that only marketed outside of the region and others that only sold limited specialty products (e.g., only chickens, medicinal herbs) were excluded. Twenty-five CSAs had local weekly distribution in at least one of the four counties. CSA membership size ranged from four to 300 shares. Due to time and resource constraints, a sample of 10 CSAs, stratified by county and membership size, was randomly selected for inclusion in the study. All of these were farmer organized CSAs, the most common model, and all offered regularly scheduled local pick-up either at the farm or at other central locations. The sample CSAs are representative of the region in terms of location and membership size (see Table 1).

Via telephone or email contact, nine CSA owners agreed to participate and allow researchers to have access to their members at their pick-up locations. The one farm that refused was replaced with the next closest farm in size in that county. Once CSA locations were confirmed, using Google Maps, a farmers market and a health food store in closest proximity to each randomly sampled CSA were selected as data collection sites. Data collection was conducted in June–August 2009, the busiest time of the year for CSAs and the prime season for the availability of fresh produce in the region. Eight hundred eighty-seven surveys were collected including 506 CSA members, 201 farmers market shoppers, and 180 health food store customers. Data collection times were scheduled according to CSA pick-ups and farmers market and store hours.

In order to draw comparisons between civic agriculture and conventional food consumers, a companion telephone survey of 423 randomly selected residents was conducted by the Siena Research Institute in April 2010. The telephone survey data were weighted to reflect regional population parameters (age, education, income and race) based on 2009 US Census data (see Table 2).

Questionnaires and measures

In this study, the independent variable is civic agriculture participation and the dependent variables include connection to community, volunteerism, and political/civic activities. These concepts were operationalized in the following ways:

Level of civic agriculture was measured with a single variable noting where the survey was conducted: at a CSA, farmers market, or health food store; or, the telephone survey representing the conventional food purchasers. If a farmers market or independent health food store shopper indicated that they also belonged to a CSA, for analysis, they were included as a CSA member. *Civic agriculture participants* is a dichotomous variable that combines all types of civic agriculture: CSA members/farmers market

Table 2 Sample demographics

	All civic agriculture participants	CSA members	Farmers market patrons	Health food store shoppers	General population
Sample size	887	506	201	180	423
Age (%)					
Under 35	19	17	20	24	30
34–44	21	26	15	14	11
45–54	24	25	21	22	20
55 or older	36	32	44	40	39
Education (%)					
High school or less	4	3	7	6	32
Some college	20	15	26	27	38
Bachelor's degree	29	30	28	30	17
Graduate degree	46	52	39	37	13
Income (%)					
Under $50,000	25	19	32	36	39
$50,000 to $75,000	18	18	14	21	18
$75,000 to $100,000	22	23	23	19	16
$100,000 or more	35	40	31	24	28
Race (%)					
White non-Hispanic	91	92	92	88	73
Non-white	9	8	8	12	27

shoppers/health food stores patrons, or not (general population).

Community engagement is traditionally divided into three broad categories: connection to community, volunteerism, and political/civic activities. Survey questions designed to capture engagement were developed based on similar questions used by the US Census and national research organizations that track political and civic engagement (GSS 2013; NCOC 2006; Pew 2012; Saguaro 2006; US BLS 2013).

Connection to community measures were based on two questions: how people rated their communities ("Overall, how would you rate your community as a place to live? Would you say it is: excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?"), and efficacy, that is, whether or not people felt they could initiate positive change ("Overall, how much impact do you think people like you can have in making your community a better place to live: a big impact, a moderate impact, a small impact, or no impact at all?").

Volunteerism was measured with a single item: "In the past year have you done any volunteer activities through or for an organization? Please include any activities that you may do infrequently and activities that you may not think of as volunteer work such as activities done for schools or youth organizations."

Political/civic activities included seven behavioral items that were analyzed separately and as composite score (coded 0–7): "Which of the following things have you done in the past year? Signed a petition; Attended a political meeting; Worked on a community project; Participated in any demonstrations, protests, boycotts, or marches; Written a letter to a legislator or policy maker; Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper; Contributed money to a cause." One attitudinal measure was also included, *interest in local politics*: "How interested are you in local politics: very, somewhat, only slightly, or not at all?"

Preference for buying local or organic was also measured: "When buying food, which is more important to you: buying local or buying organic?" *Motivation for purchasing local* goods was measured using a ranking question: "Please rank the following reasons why you purchase local food from 1 to 4 in order of their importance to you: To support local farmers and the local economy; To get higher quality, better tasting food; Because it is healthier; Because it is better for the environment." Finally, socio-demographic questions were asked covering age, gender, education, race, ethnicity, and income.

Analysis and results

Our methodology allows us to assess the relationships between participation in various forms of civic agriculture and community engagement, while controlling for other variables already proven to impact engagement. Descriptive

Table 3 Survey results comparing civic agriculture participants and the general population

	All civic agriculture participants (%)	CSA members (%)	Farmers market patrons (%)	Health food store shoppers (%)	General population (%)
Community rating					
Excellent	33	34	34	30	30
Very good	44	43	43	47	34
Good	19	20	20	18	24
Fair	3	3	2	4	9
Poor	1	<1	1	1	4
Efficacy in community					
A big impact	76	79	78	65	32
A moderate impact	21	18	19	29	37
A small impact	3	2	3	5	22
No impact at all	<1	1	<1	1	10
Volunteerism					
Yes	71	76	66	63	48
Political/civic activities					
Signed a petition	72	75	65	69	45
Contributed money to a cause	67	68	66	62	76
Written a letter to a legislator or policy maker	46	47	42	46	34
Attended a political meeting	43	45	40	39	21
Worked on a community project	43	45	44	37	32
Participated in any demonstrations, protests, boycotts, or marches	24	26	20	26	9
Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper	22	23	22	21	13
Activities: three or more	59	62	55	53	42
Interest in local politics					
Very interested	36	35	44	32	21
Somewhat interested	46	48	40	47	36
Only slightly interested	15	15	14	17	26
Not at all interested	3	2	2	4	16
Preference					
Buy local	65	65	78	51	80
Buy organic	35	35	22	49	20
Buying local motivation (% ranking most important)					
Support local farmers and economy	39	37	46	38	49
Higher quality, better tasting food	35	36	37	30	21
Healthier	18	17	13	26	22
Better for the environment	9	11	7	8	8

statistics are reported and for comparisons between the samples and subgroups, Chi square tests were run to identify statistically significant differences.

The results were largely consistent with our hypotheses. On virtually every measure, civic agriculture participants taken together (CSA members, farmers market shoppers, and independent health food store customers) reported higher rates of community engagement compared with the general population. Specifically, as shown in Table 3, 71 % of civic agriculture consumers reported volunteering compared with 48 % in the general population. In regard to political activities, 72 % of civic agriculture consumers signed petitions compared with 45 % in the general population. Twice as many civic agriculture participants (43 %) attended a political meeting as have members of the general population (21 %). Civic agriculture participants

more often wrote letters to legislators or to newspaper editors (46 and 22 %, respectively) compared with the general consuming public (34 and 13 %) and many more reported having participated in political demonstrations (24 %) compared with their conventional counterparts (9 %). These behavioral differences are matched by reported interest in local politics whereby 82 % of civic agriculture participants say that they are somewhat or very interested compared with 57 % of the general public.

Table 3 also shows that differences between civic agriculture consumers and the general population can be found in terms of attitude and outlook in regard to their communities. Seventy-seven percent of civic agriculture consumers rated their communities as excellent or very good compared with the general population of whom only 64 % offered such a positive assessment. Civic agriculture consumers were also more likely to feel that they can make a difference. Seventy-six percent felt that they could have a big impact on their community compared with just 32 % of the general public that has a similar optimistic sense of their own efficacy. The only activity for which civic agriculture consumers reported lower rates was in the area of charitable giving. Yet, overall, these clear patterns demonstrate a positive association between civic agriculture participation and community engagement.

In addition to finding support for the primary hypothesis regarding the validity of the civic agriculture thesis, we found some support for our hypothesis regarding levels of civic agriculture. In general, the patterns found between various types of civic agriculture and community engagement were consistent with predictions, and while not all of the differences were statistically significant, the trends tracked largely as expected. As predicted, CSA members compared with farmers market shoppers and health food store customers reported higher rates of community engagement. Deviations from this pattern are rare. All three groups had very positive assessment of their communities, with 77 % of each group rating their communities as very good or excellent. Health food store shoppers matched CSA members in terms of participation in demonstrations (26 %). But on all other measures, CSA members, those engaged in what we consider the deepest form of civic agriculture, were more engaged in their communities.

As indicated in Table 4, although the patterns are largely consistent with our hypothesis, few of the differences found within the civic agriculture categories were statistically significant when each group was compared to the other two. Among the significant findings are that CSA members are more likely to engage in volunteerism compared with those who shop at farmers markets or independent health food stores. Seventy-six percent of CSA members volunteered compared with 66 % of farmers market shoppers and 63 % of health food store customers. Health food store shoppers were significantly lower on their sense of efficacy in terms of improving their communities. CSA members were also significantly more likely to sign petitions and when political activities were combined, CSA members were significantly more likely to have engaged in three or more such activities.

As discussed earlier, some civic agriculture skeptics and critics of recent food movements have charged that these developments are more reflective of an elite consumer trend than a real effort to transform the food and agriculture system (DeLind 2011; Guthman 2003). As indicated in Table 2, our data reflect the notion that civic agriculture consumers tend to be wealthier and more educated than the general population. However, the central question of this study is whether these forms of consumption enhance community engagement, and here the evidence suggests that civic agriculture has the possibility of fostering community engagement across demographic groups.

There is a large body of literature that has identified associations between demographic characteristics and community engagement; these factors include age, education, and income. Those who are younger, less educated and less well off volunteer less and participate less in the political arena. Because civic agriculture participants in our sample were more educated and had higher incomes compared with the general population, we controlled for these factors to determine the civic agriculture effect. As shown on Table 5, when controlling for age, education, and income, the "civic agriculture effect" is still clearly evident. In other words, the heightened levels of community engagement found in association with civic agriculture participation cannot be explained based on the fact that participants tend to be wealthier, older, and more educated. For example, when looking at volunteerism, where those with lower incomes tend to be less involved, the lower income category of civic agriculture participants was not only significantly more engaged than their conventional food buying peers (69 vs. 40 %), they also out-volunteered their wealthier counterparts from the general population (55 %). The same can be said of younger civic agriculture participants. They volunteered more than their youthful peers (69 vs. 50 %) and older conventional consumers (46 %). Civic agriculture consumers with less education also volunteered more than college graduates in the general population (63 vs. 57 %). The same patterns are found when examining political/civic participation. Civic agriculture participants of all ages, income, and education levels were more likely to be engaged compared with their counterparts in the general population.

Table 4 Tests of significance between levels of civic agriculture participants and compared with the general population

	All civic agriculture participants (%)	CSA members (%)	Farmers market patrons (FM) (%)	Health food store shoppers (HFS) (%)	General population (%)	*p* values for difference of means tests			
						All civic ag versus gen pop	CSA members versus other civic ag	Farmers market patrons versus other civic ag	Health food store shoppers versus other civic ag
Community rating									
Excellent/very good	77	77	77	77	64	<.01	.81	.95	.72
Efficacy in community									
A big impact	76	79	78	65	32	<.01	.02	.40	<.01
Volunteerism									
Yes	71	76	66	63	48	<.01	<.01	.06	<.01
Political/civic activities									
Signed a petition	72	75	65	69	45	<.01	<.01	.01	.48
Contributed money to a cause	67	68	66	62	76	<.01	.18	.91	.12
Written a letter to a legislator or policy maker	46	47	42	46	34	<.01	.32	.23	.97
Attended a political meeting	43	45	40	39	21	<.01	.13	.47	.27
Worked on a community project	43	45	44	37	32	<.01	.20	.78	.06
Participated in any demonstrations, protests, boycotts, or marches	24	26	20	26	9	<.01	.26	.09	.70
Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper	22	23	22	21	13	<.01	.67	.90	.69
Activities: three or more	59	62	55	53	42	<.01	.02	.27	.11
Interest in local politics	82	83	84	80	57	<.01	.72	.47	.23

Discussion

Overall this study provides support for the theory that participating in civic agriculture is related to community and civic and political engagement. The patterns revealed in regard to civic agriculture participants compared with the general population document that these new or revived agriculture systems provide places where socially beneficial behaviors can be found. Positive sentiments and optimism about one's community is matched by more active community involvement among those who participate in civic agriculture. These relationships hold true even when controlling for variables such as age, education, and income.

"Food shopping alone?"

To some degree these findings contrast with those of a recent similar study by Pole and Gray (2013). Their web survey, which focused exclusively on CSA members from across New York State, led them to conclude that, "…CSAs do not necessarily promote or facilitate community for their members" (Pole and Gray 2013, p. 96). Pole and Gray reach this conclusion based upon certain survey responses. For example, they report that one-third of the respondents did not feel integrated into their CSA. Respondents also ranked their desire for fresh organic produce as a stronger motivation for joining their CSA, compared with their desire to build a stronger sense of community.

Table 5 Volunteerism and civic/political activities by age, education, and income

	Civic agriculture participants (%)	General population (%)	*p* value
Volunteered past year	71	48	<.01
Age			
18–44	69	50	<.01
45 or older	73	46	<.01
Education			
Less than college	63	43	<.01
College or more	74	57	<.01
Income			
Under $75,000	69	40	<.01
$75,000 or more	73	55	<.01
Political/civic activities: three or more	59	42	<.01
Age			
18–44	60	29	<.01
45 or older	65	52	<.01
Education			
Less than college	50	36	<.01
College or more	66	57	.06
Income			
Under $75,000	63	37	<.01
$75,000 or more	63	54	.06

Although our conclusions appear to contrast with those of Pole and Gray, a closer examination suggests that there are many consistencies in the data from the two studies, and that both lend support to the civic agriculture thesis. Consistent with our findings, Pole and Gray found that CSA members were more politically engaged and more likely to volunteer in their communities compared with general public. For example, in the region we examined, 71 % of CSA members reported volunteering. Pole and Gray found that 73 % of CSA members from across the state volunteered. These compare with 21 % statewide for the general population (CNCS 2011). This and other findings in both studies suggest that in terms of *actual behavior*, there *is* an association between civic agriculture participation and community engagement.

Pole and Gray's conclusion that CSAs fail to live up to the civic agriculture ideal is derived primarily from the reported *feelings and motivations* of CSA members, such as the priority given to accessing local organic food over the desire to build community. Self-reported motivations are limited in what they reveal in that civic agriculture participants may not engage in these activities in order to consciously develop their community participation and connectedness. One need not be motivated by a desire to build community for a stronger community to develop. As with any economic activity, including participation in civic agriculture, the primary motivation for engagement in it is likely to be instrumental and self-interested. CSAs, like farmers markets, independent grocery stores, and supermarkets, are first and foremost means by which people obtain food. The core economic function of these entities cannot be ignored, and it should come as no surprise that CSA members (or farmers market shoppers or independent grocer customers) are motivated to engage in the activity in order to obtain the goods that these outlets provide. Pole and Gray report that CSA members in their study felt relatively high levels of community at work and at school, but it is unlikely that any worker would rank the desire for community above obtaining a paycheck as their central motivation for going to work. Moreover, over one-third of the respondents in the Pole and Gray study report that, "Joining a CSA has opened my eyes to the importance of being part of a community." This finding is not trivial and lends support to the civic agriculture thesis. Comparative data was not presented in their study, but it is difficult to imagine that anyone would report discovering the importance of community at a supermarket or a big box store (unless, perhaps, it was recognition of its absence).

The effects of civic agriculture must be considered relative to participation in the conventional food system. When these comparisons are done, there appears to be a consistent relationship between participation in civic agriculture and heightened community engagement. Our examination of the levels of embeddedness of different civic agriculture activities and its relationship to community engagement provides additional evidence of this connection by suggesting the process through which that association comes to be. Those engaged in more embedded forms of civic agriculture exchange are those who are the most engaged in the community.

Critics of some of the early civic agriculture literature provide an important corrective to the more exuberant claims made about this social development. Civic agriculture is still agriculture, the production of a good primarily for the purposes of exchange. The economic component of all civic agriculture cannot be ignored. But this study indicates that the manner in which agricultural production and food distribution are organized can have a real effect on how we behave as citizens and community members. The extent of that effect must be measured relative to the alternative, participation in the globalized conventional food system. In this regard, both this study and that conducted by Pole and Gray provide significant support for the civic agriculture thesis.

Our findings also reveal some interesting variation among different types of civic agriculture participants. While there

was a great deal of consistency in our assessment of the levels of civic agriculture and community engagement, in some instances health food store shoppers demonstrated more community involvement than farmers market shoppers, whom we had anticipated would engage at higher rates. This indicates diversity among civic agriculture consumers, especially when it comes to questions of health. While majorities of CSA members and farmers market shoppers perceive buying local as more important than buying organic, health food store shoppers were split on this question.[4] Variation among civic agriculture participants is an area in need of further exploration.

In another departure from our predictions, civic agriculture consumers were less likely to engage in charitable giving than the general population. This result provides some support for the contention that monetary contributions have come to displace other forms of participation with social groups and political causes (Skocpol 2003). Charitable giving is one way in which members of the public may "make up for" their lack of direct engagement. This may also be a reflection of how people choose to direct their resources in ways that they believe to be socially beneficial, with some opting to donate to charitable causes and others prioritizing purchases that they consider to be socially responsible. The issue of charitable giving requires further analysis, but irrespective of that particular finding, we still see a clear positive association between civic agriculture and actual community participation.

"Which came first, the (free range) chicken
or the (organic) egg?"

Studies on civic engagement provide convincing evidence that the social interaction and the bonds formed within organizations facilitate political engagement and strengthen democracy. This study provides further support for that association. But a challenge posed to this and most other civic engagement studies is the question of causality. We consistently find that those who are involved in various types of civic organizations are also more civically minded and politically engaged, but we cannot say with certainty that the associated social interaction has facilitated a heightened sense of community identity and political consciousness or if those who already have such characteristics are the ones who join organizations. In the words of Brady et al., "In the absence of actual life histories collected over respondents' lifetimes, we cannot be absolutely certain that adult decisions about family, work, organizational involvements or affiliations with religious institutions are apart from and in advance of choices to take part politically, but these seem plausible assumptions" (1995, p. 272). Given the evidence presented here, the notion that civic agriculture is fostering, or at least reinforcing, heightened community engagement is a reasonable conclusion. It is judicious to assume that at least some subjects in this study had some preexisting level of civic consciousness and that this, in part, contributed to their decisions to participate in civic agriculture. Those who are less community minded likely choose to anonymously purchase their food at the supermarket, and, consistent with the values and attitudes that draw them to the supermarket, they also remain relatively less engaged politically.

The controls used in this analysis provide a hedge against some of the more obvious alternative explanations for heightened community engagement among civic agriculture participants. Age, income, and education are all known to be associated with civic engagement. People who have more wealth, more education and who are at a certain place in the life course show relatively higher levels of voluntarism and other forms of civic engagement (Brady et al. 1995). While we found that civic agriculture consumers compared to the general population were wealthier and more educated, when we controlled for those factors, civic agriculture participants still demonstrated higher levels of engagement compared with their counterparts in the general population. In fact, civic agriculture participants in each category who were younger, had less education, and lower incomes volunteered at higher rates compared not only to their conventional consuming peers, but also higher than conventional consumers who were older, wealthier and more educated.

More research is needed to further test the civic agriculture hypothesis. Studies examining civic agriculture practices in different regions would allow for more generalizable claims. One recent study found a similar correlation between farmers market shopping and civic engagement in Bozeman, Montana (Sheets 2011). More studies of this sort will bolster the claim of a generalizable association. The ways in which civic agriculture manifests in urban versus suburban or rural regions would also be a fruitful line of study. This could also provide an opportunity to consider whether and how various groups are excluded from civic agriculture participation and to explore other less traditional conceptions of civic engagement.

Longitudinal research could strengthen causal claims regarding the effects of civic agriculture. The fact that civic agriculture is still on the rise provides opportunities for such study. CSAs have yet to come to many communities.

[4] The general population reported a strong preference for local over organic when asked to prioritize based on these two options. This should not be interpreted as stronger preference for local food above that which is found among civic agriculture consumers who actually direct much of their purchasing in this way. The question only pertains to preference given just these two options. Overall conventional food shoppers purchase relatively little food that is either organic or local.

At the community level, cases in which civic and political engagement are measured before and after the entry of CSAs into an area could more precisely capture their impact. Panel studies that measure the civic engagement levels of individuals before and after joining a CSA could also more definitively determine the presence or absence of a causal connection.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between civic agriculture and community engagement, that is, to test the civic agriculture thesis. While causal claims are implied but not definitive, given the patterns of engagement demonstrated here and the controls utilized, the civic agriculture thesis provides the best framework for explaining the associations this study documents. Forums in which citizens in a community are brought together create awareness, identity, and social bonds that facilitate still deeper engagement with one's surroundings and the people who coexist within that environment. If we accept this, then civic agriculture, as demonstrated here, can play a crucial role in reinvigorating communities and democracy.

Civic agriculture may prove to be a particularly important avenue toward renewed community engagement simply because food is necessary to life. People may choose to join a social club, but there is nothing compelling them to be social. People may join the PTA, but there is nothing requiring them to be involved in their children's education. People may become a part of the local softball league, but there is no inherent need for anyone to participate in recreational sports. But everyone must buy food. They can get that food at the supermarket, "shopping alone," as the vast majority still does. But civic agriculture is opening up new avenues toward both food purchasing and community involvement, and it is happening at a time when other face-to-face opportunities for civic engagement are in decline. Millions of Americans are now acquiring at least some of their food through CSAs or farmers markets, and their numbers are growing (USDA 2009). As these opportunities expand, more people are likely to try one of these alternative venues and, in doing so, we should expect a corresponding increase in civic engagement.

Despite this promise, we should temper our expectations. Critics have cast doubt on some of the optimistic claims put forth by early civic agriculture theorists. We cannot lose sight of the fact that food purchasing is still fundamentally an economic activity, and in the context of a market system, the pursuit of self-interest is not going to disappear. But this acknowledgment does not mean that the act of food buying is limited to a singular purpose or result, and beneficial outcomes can occur if market exchanges are embedded in social relationships such as those fostered by civic agriculture. We still have a great deal to learn about what advantages accrue and the variations under different circumstances and models, but there is growing evidence that these types of enterprises have the potential to offer significant social benefit.

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