Week: 8

Civics and Community Engagement

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Civic Engagement, Civic Space, Advocacy and Social Activism

Defining Civic Engagement

There is a lack of consensus on "what is constitutes civic engagement?" (Gibson, 2000, p. 17). Campus Compact, an organization that promotes greater civic engagement within higher education, has argued that a lack of consensus about the meaning of the term at this time is natural and even appropriate in light of the relative immaturity of the field.

SPECIFIC DEFINITIONS

As Ramaley notes, how civic engagement is defined depends on the perspective and interests of the definer. What is striking is how wide the range of definitions for the term is. When looked at together, these definitions help suggest the extent and variety of activities that the term encompasses and help to illuminate the various points of view about the concept.

The following are just a few examples of how the term has been defined.

Civic engagement as community service. Some definitions of civic engagement emphasize participation in voluntary service to one's local community, either by an individual acting independently or as a participant in a group. For example, "Civic engagement [is] an individual's duty to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship with the obligation to actively participate, alone or in concert with others, in volunteer service activities that strengthen the local community" (Diller, 2001, p. 21).[2]

Civic engagement as collective action. Other definitions restrict the term to apply just to action taken collectively to improve society. For example, "Civic engagement is any activity where people come together in their role as citizens" (Diller, 2001, p. 22) and "Civic engagement may be defined as the means by which an individual, through collective action, influences the larger civil society" (Van Benshoten, 2001).

Dean Robert Hollister (2002) of Tufts University prefers the term *active citizenship* to *civic engagement*, but his definition also emphasizes the importance of collaboration with others in a variety of venues: "Active citizenship is about collective action more than the behavior of individuals. It is about collaboration, about intense joint activity…pursuing community issues through work in all sec- tors, not just government."

Civic engagement as political involvement. Yet other definitions limit the meaning of the term to activities that are not only collective but that are specifically political (i.e., that involve government action): "Civic engagement differs from an individual ethic of service in that it directs individual efforts toward collective action in solving problems through our political process" (Diller, 2001, p. 7).

The Latin word *civis* has found its way into two words in our language, city and citizen. Civic engagement is about rediscovering politics, the life of the polis, the city where men and women speak and act together, as citizens. The word *civic*, when connected to engagement, implies work, work that is done publicly and benefits the public, and is done in concert with others.

Civic engagement describes citizen participation in civic affairs. Civic mission is not the same thing as service mission. Service implies doing for and civic im- plies doing with. Service is about meeting people's needs. Civic is about deliberations and public work aimed at some public issue or challenge. Civic engagement involves active participation and leadership in public life. (*Civic Engagement*, n.d.)

Civic engagement as social change. In his definition of the term, David Crowley (n.d.), founder of Social Capital, Inc., focuses on the element of social change inherent in civic engagement: "Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of the community in order to help shape its future. Ultimately, civic engagement has to include the dimensions of social change."

A PROPOSED DEFINITION FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

So how civic engagement should be defined, particularly in relation to interest in expanding civic engagement among older adults?

Perhaps the simplest definition of civic engagement is "the interactions of citizens with their society and their government" (*Civic Engagement*, n.d.).[3] Drawing on some of the definitions cited earlier, and particularly on that from David Crowley (n.d.), a useful definition would be the following: Civic engagement de- scribes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future.

CHARTING THE DIMENSIONS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Up to now, we have focused on how the term *civic engagement* has been defined in the abstract. But to get a fuller understanding of the term, it is useful to look at some attempts to define the term operationally, in terms of how civic engagement is actually being practiced in the world. In this section, we consider some recent empirical findings about the extent of civic engagement by Americans and how patterns of engagement vary between generations.

INDICATORS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A 2001 report on *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002) presents the results of a national telephone

survey of 3,246 Americans aged 15 to 55+ that was designed to find out "what citizens are doing and how often they are doing it."

The 19 Core Indicators of Engagement

Civic indicators

      Community problem solving

      Regular volunteering for a nonelectoral organization

      Active membership in a group or association

      Participation in fund-raising run/walk/ride

      Other fund-raising for charity

Electoral indicators

      Regular voting

      Persuading others

      Displaying buttons, signs, stickers

      Campaign contributions

      Volunteering for candidate or political organizations

Indicators of political voice

      Contacting officials

      Contacting the print media

      Contacting the broadcast media

      Protesting

      E-mail petitions

      Written petitions

      Boycotting

      Buycotting

Canvassing

SOURCE: Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002).

The researchers who conducted the survey created a list of 19 "core activities" that they considered to be components of civic engagement. These activities are divided into three main categories: indicators of community-focused activities ("civic indicators"), including volunteering and raising funds for charitable causes; indicators of participation in the electoral process ("electoral indicators"), including voting and working for a candidate or a political party; and "indicators of political activity", including actively supporting or opposing particular issues or policies.

Civic Space

Concept of civic engagement cannot be fully comprehendible without the concept of civic space. The United Nations has put special emphasis on the concept of protecting the civic space. Civic Space is the environment that enables civic engagement.

According to the UN, civic space is the environment that enables civil society to play a role in the political, economic and social life of our societies. In particular, civic space allows individuals and groups to contribute to policy-making that affects their lives, including by:

- accessing information,

- engaging in dialogue,

- expressing dissent or disagreement, and

- joining together to express their views.

An open and pluralistic civic space that guarantees freedom of expression and opinion as well as freedom of assembly and association, is a prerequisite for making development and peace sustainable.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) civic space is a cornerstone of functioning democracies. Defined as the set of conditions non-governmental actors need to participate in public life, a thriving civic space emerges through the combined efforts of a range of actors, including governments, line ministries, public institutions, and civil society.

Promotion and Protection of Civic Space

OECD proposes ten overarching high-level recommendations on protecting and promoting civic space:

- Protect and facilitate **freedom of expression**.

- Protect and facilitate **freedom of peaceful assembly** and the right to protest.

- Counter the **discrimination**, **exclusion and marginalisation** that disproportionately affect certain groups and hinder equal participation in public life.

- Safeguard and protect **human rights defenders, journalists, whistle blowers,** and other at-risk groups.

- Foster a **public interest information ecosystem** that protects independent media and promotes access to information.

- Protect **online civic space**, including by countering hate speech and mis- and disinformation.

- Respect **privacy** and ensure **personal data protection** to avoid arbitrary intrusion and interference in public life.

- Foster an **enabling environment for civil society organisations** that facilitates their positive contribution to society.

- Protect civic space both domestically as well as through development co-operation as part of a **coherent policy approach**.

- Systematically protect and promote civic space as a precondition for **citizens and stakeholders to engage** in public decision making to foster more open, transparent and accountable governance.

Social Activism

Social activism is a tool utilized by social movements, demonstrating how individuals can organise, participate in protests, and engage in decision-making processes that influence social life. It serves as a gauge of the level of citizen involvement in public affairs and participatory democracy. Social activism takes on various forms, ranging from subtle actions such as letter-writing to massive protests and demonstrations (Dumitraşcu, 2015).

Definition of Activism

Activism is a complex social phenomenon encompassing a variety of different forms of social activity and engagement, which has an impact on the definition of the concept (Snow & Oliver, 1995). In defining activism, three issues are of utmost importance:

The structures and scope of actions:

It is debated whether activism must go beyond traditional social structures and institutions to be considered as *activism*, or whether it can be more institutional in nature.

The debate raises the question of whether activism is limited to demonstrating and pro-testing only, or whether it includes a wider range of activities and attitudes, such as public education, charitable work, and lobbying, which can also take a form of social activism (Corning & Myers, 2002).

1. **Organizational structure and coordination**:

Regarding the degree of coordination, the debate is whether activism requires consider- able organization and coordination between the participants involved, or whether it can be more individualized and spontaneous.

With regard to the roles of organizational structures, the discussion focuses on the question whether activism needs to be closely tied to specific organizations or social movements, or whether it can take place within loose social networks (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007).

2. **Types of actions taken:**

Whether activism is limited to overtly expressed actions only (protesting, demon- strating) or whether it also includes beliefs and intellectual involvement in social issues – education, conversation, and discussion related to social issues – is debated (Corning & Myers, 2002).

The ways in which the term is defined are reflected in the ways in which activism is viewed in the literature. According to Corning and Myers (2002), activism can be defined as certain behaviours exhibited in support of a political cause, including environmental protection, human rights issues, opposition to abortion, preventing war through a variety of possible measures; performing low-risk institutional actions (such as initiation of petitions) and unconventional high- risk actions (such as demonstrations or acts of civil disobedience).

According to V. Dumitraşcu (2015), activism means engaging in activities aimed at bringing about social, political, economic or environmental change through active campaigning, mobilization, and social interaction. Activists take these actions, believing that it is necessary and possible to make a positive difference in society.

The Tactics

Three types of activism: (Dumitraşcu, 2015)

1. To demand solutions to contemporary problems by taking an oppositional stance to main-stream politics. This includes short-term actions such as going on strike, protesting, and demonstrating.

2. This type of activism manifests itself in the creation of alternatives to the dominant system through the construction of new forms of social behavior. Activists are involved in the creation of cooperatives, community centers, and other institutions promoting values such as equality, sustainability, and participation.

3. Revolutionary activism is associated with a fundamental change in the society and its major institutions.

Activists choose appropriate forms of activity, depending on the context and purpose, to influence social change and pursue their social goals. In addition to the well-known "repertoire of tactics," including pressuring methods such as boycotts, petitions, marches, and sit-ins, in response to current social challenges, activists develop more innovative forms of action. If a new tactic proves to be successful, it can be adopted by others. This process is referred to as "diffusion" and it contributes to the expansion of the activist repertoire (Ayres, 1999). In recent years, activists have adopted new online and social technologies and incorporated them into their arsenal of actions (Haunss, 2015).

The Rise of Online Activism

Evolution of online activism, encompassing key phases and technologies that have influenced the shaping of social engagement on the Internet

Phase	Forms of online activism
Early internet days	In the 1990s and early 2000s, the internet was primarily used for information dissemination, and communication. However, online activism, as understood today, was in its infancy. The main tools were emails and simple websites.
Era of blogging and forums	Around 2000–2010, there was a growth in the popularity of blogs and online forums. People began expressing their opinions, connecting with others with similar beliefs, and engaging in discussions on various topics.
Era of social media	Around 2010, a noticeable surge in online community activity, especially on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, was observed. Activists began using these platforms to spread their messages and organize social campaigns.
Rise of hashtags and social media campaigns	From around 2010, hashtags became a key mobilization tool for activist movements. They were used to promote ideas and attract attention.

Video and live streaming era	In recent years, particularly after 2015, the popularity of live video and online streaming has been on the rise. Activists use them to report events, organize debates, and showcase their activities.
Crowdfunding activism	In recent years, crowdfunding activism has been growing, where funds are collected online to support various social initiatives.

These phases highlight the progression of activism in the digital realm, from its early stages to leveraging advanced online tools and platforms for a broader impact.

Digital Technology and Online Activism

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer a great deal of potential for social activism and protest movements. The following are the main ways in which digital technologies, especially social media and online platforms, aid activism (Greijdanus et al., 2020):

Democratizing the Message and Expressing Opinions: Social media also allow those who traditionally have had limited access to mass media to be heard. These platforms support the allowing everyone to express their opinion and share their thoughts or experiences. In 2017, the Virtual Disability March enabled people with disabilities to participate in it in alternative ways and created an opportunity for them to get involved in the protests (Li et al., 2018).

Mobilization and Organization: Social media platforms make it possible to mobilize people around a specific cause or social action in a speedy manner. Creating events, groups or campaigns has become much easier, which helps activists be more effective at coordination. Protests in Egypt and Tunisia have provided the first evidence of how digital technology can be used to launch such protests and turn a dispersed, localized or individual- ized resistance into a cohesive community (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Raising Awareness and Providing Education: Social media can be used to spread awareness about a variety of social, political or cultural issues. Communicating social issues and presenting data and facts encourage people to get involved and take action.

Pushing the Boundaries of Public Debate: Social media have the potential to transcend the traditional boundaries of public debate and be a vehicle for the engagement of people from different cultures, geographies and communities. They create a space where different perspectives can be discussed and considered.

Generation of Social Pressure and Attitude Change: Public pressure can be generated to change political decisions or institutional approaches through actions, petitions, and campaigns on

online platforms. Comments and reactions from communities are an indicator of social pressure.

<u>Building Activist Communities</u>: Social media make it possible to build strong communities of activists, whose members can support one another, share ideas, and coordinate their efforts for a common cause.

<u>Help Provided to NGOs</u>: NGOs can use social media to reach a wider audience, raise funds, attract volunteers, and promote what they want democratic nature of public discussion by to do and achieves.

In emergency situations, digital technologies also play a key role as an effective information tool (Zulli, 2020).In spite of these benefits, there are also concerns about the impact that digital technologies have on activism. Such technologies do not pro- vide a solution to major problems, such as inequality, and inequality continues to inhibit the influence of minority and marginalized voices on public debate. There is some concern that the virtual world may exacerbate inequality by increasing the influence of the stronger individuals at the expense of the weaker ones: those who do not have access to such technologies or who do not have the skills to use them. Additionally, online forms of protesting can duplicate traditional forms but prove to be less effective or emotionally engaging (Zulli, 2020).

There are also concerns about the superficial engagement of online activists in the context of risks associated with the use of technology. There is a risk that the simple act of clicking a button or sharing a post on social media platforms will not translate into real impact on social structures (Zulli, 2020).

Reference:

The Notes are extracted from the below given sources:

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