

# Influences on Undergraduate Student Civic Engagement

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## Abstract

Civic engagement is essential to a democratic society, yet today's youth seem generally apathetic to the idea. Existing research confirms that civic engagement has been dwindling in recent years, so it is in our best interest to act to encourage future students to become civically engaged (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). This research investigates the relationship between gender and factors that influence civic engagement in a sample of college students at a Midwestern university. The purpose of this study was to examine this relationship and use results from this study to inform university students, administrators, faculty, staff, and fellow researchers to incorporate it into current course curriculum and future research. The research question in this study was: "What influences male and female undergraduate students' civic engagement?" We predicted no difference between male and female civic engagement because both have the same components comprising their microsystem, thus the factors that influence students to be civically engaged are the same according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 as cited in White & Klein, 2002, p. 216). This hypothesis is based upon evidence from both literature and theory. Paper surveys were administered to 12 undergraduate classrooms. Surveys included 12 statements that were evaluated by students on the Likert scale. Support for the hypothesis is mixed with statistically significant differences for four of the 12 variables. Implications for practitioners include gender specific teaching about civic engagement. Future research would benefit from a random national sample with supplemental qualitative interviews to understand lived experiences.

*Key words:* Civic engagement, social responsibility, citizenship, undergraduate students.

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Civic engagement is essential to the democratic society we live in; today's youth, however, seem generally apathetic to the idea. Existing research confirms that civic engagement has been dwindling in recent years, so it is in our best interest to act now to encourage future students to become civically engaged (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). For this study's purpose, we followed the American Psychological Association's use of Michael Delli Carpini's (former Director of Public Policy at The Pew Charitable Trusts) definition, "Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern" (American Psychological Association, 2015). The lack of civic engagement in college students is of national concern. In every presidential election in past 48 years, young adults ages 18-24 have voted at lower rates than any other age group (File, 2014).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was threefold: to examine the relationship between gender and influences on civic engagement with a sample of undergraduate students, to develop a reliable survey instrument to measure those influences, and, that the results from this study would inform university students, administrators, faculty, staff as well as fellow researchers to incorporate civic engagement into current course curriculum and future research. The central research question in this study was: "What influences male and female undergraduate students' civic engagement?" We predicted there would not be a difference between male and female civic engagement because males and females have the same components comprising their microsystem, thus their influences to be civically engaged are the same according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 as cited in White & Klein, 2002, p. 216).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory used to inform this study was Ecological Theory of Development, which assumes that individuals are at the center of a multi-layered system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 as cited in White & Klein, 2002, p. 216). The individual's development is impacted through the interactions of the various layers. The microsystem contains the innermost relationships including caregivers, peers, teachers, workplace, and neighborhood. The next layer, the mesosystem, describes the interaction between relationships in the microsystem. The exosystem contains institutions that affect development but have no direct interaction with the individual. Finally, the macrosystem, which includes the larger societal and cultural influence on the developing individual. As applied to our study, Theory of Development

would predict that the greatest influences on civic engagement come from the microsystem because development is a result of the interactions between the individual and their immediate surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 as cited in White & Klein, 2002, p. 216). Additionally, males and females have the same components comprising their microsystems, so theory would predict influences on civic engagement to be similar for both genders.

### **Literature Review**

Literature was found using the EBSCOhost online database with the initial search limited to the United States, published within the past 10 years. After difficulty identifying relevant literature due to a lack of studies looking at undergraduate students' civic engagement, we expanded our search to North America and Europe. Of the five articles selected, one is from the United Kingdom, two are from Canada, and two are from the United States. The literature considers both service learning and political engagement (Weerts, Cabrera, & Mejías, 2014; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012; Stockemer 2012; Gallant, Smale, & Arai, 2010; Lopes, Benton, & Cleaver, 2009).

Weerts et al. (2014) conducted a study that looked at different categories of civically engaged college students. Students' attitudes toward engagement played a role in their categorical placement. Types of engagement varied from political, pro-social, a combination of the two, or non-engaged. Non-engagers were students who were considered spectators, and made up 25% of the sample. It was also found that college students' involvement tended to align with their major studies and professional career interests.

Another study from Mahatmya and Lohman (2012) emphasized the significance of considering multiple contexts and demographic influences when studying civic engagement. This study examined influences from the neighborhood, family, and school. They found that influences on civic engagement varied across neighborhoods, gender, and race. The study found that females were more civically engaged than males. In line with their predictions, gender, race, family structure, and parent education all had a significant influence on adults' civic engagement.

Stockemer (2012) studied political engagement, a form of civic engagement in students at the University of Ottawa. Stockemer found that just over two-thirds of students surveyed voted in at least one election as compared to the Canadian average of only 41% of young people voting in an election. It was also found that students first develop an interest in politics, which then transforms into political engagement. Factors identified to impact political engagement included student's major, academic standing, year of

study, and whether or not the student pays for their own tuition. Two less influential factors included work experience and whether or not the student's parents have been politically involved.

A study by Gallant et al. (2010) looked at the implications of mandatory community service in high school and the effect it had on later service and civic engagement. Gender and religiosity were found to be significantly related to ongoing community service. The study asserted the notion that high quality volunteer experiences can instill a sense of civic responsibility and contribute to continuing volunteer work. Gallant et al. (2010) concluded that the current mandated service-learning curriculum in Canada is not long enough to promote significant behavioral change but is a good beginning.

Research from Lopes et al. (2009) assessed students' existing knowledge of political systems, their interest or disinterest in politics, benefits of volunteering, and personal efficacy to determine the likelihood of future political and civic participation. It was found that one's attitude toward the benefits of political participation was most strongly related to future participation. Personal efficacy was slightly less related, though important in determining future participation. Researchers hypothesized a strong link between knowledge of political systems to future participation, but there was no significant relationship found. Female students and students with higher socioeconomic status showed higher levels of intended future civic and political participation. The researchers remarked that taking into account student's ways of engagement as well as their attitudes toward engagement might be warranted in future studies.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study was conducted at a Midwestern university. The participants were male and female undergraduate students enrolled at the university. Demographic data on the sample is found below in Table 1:

Table 1

GEN	Male: 154 Female: 128 Self Identify: 1 Missing: 2	RAE	White: 250 Black or African American: 6 American Indian or Alaska Native: 1 Asian: 17 Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: 1 Self-Identify: 8 Missing: 2
AGE	18-19: 116 20-21: 112 22-23: 36 24-25: 11 25+: 7 Missing: 3	AHI	Under \$10,000: 33 \$10,000-\$14,999: 10 \$15,000-\$19,999: 11 \$20,000-\$29,999: 14 \$30,000-\$39,999: 22 \$40,000-\$49,999: 18 \$50,000-\$74,999: 41 \$75,000-\$99,999: 53 \$100,000-\$149,999: 40 \$150,000 and over: 27 Missing: 16
MAJ	Undeclared: 49 Business Administration: 22 Psychology: 19 Construction Management: 17 Hotel, Restaurant, Tourism Management: 16 Other: 162	PLE	Some High School: 5 GED: 6 High School Diploma: 43 Some College: 57 Associate's Degree: 34 Bachelor's Degree: 91 Master's Degree: 43 Doctorate Degree: 5 Missing: 1
CLS	Freshman: 75 Sophomore: 89 Junior: 62 Senior: 47 5+: 10 Missing: 2		

Note: (GEN)= Gender; (AGE)= Age; (MAJ)= Major; (CLS)= Class Status; (RAE)=Race/Ethnicity; (AHI)=Annual Household Income; (PLE)=Parent Level of Education.

## Research Design

The purpose of this non-random survey research was to evaluate influences on civic engagement of male and female undergraduate students and examine gender differences. A cross-sectional research design was used in order to examine the influences on participant civic engagement at one point in time. Paper survey questionnaires were used for data collection in order to meet strict coursework deadlines, sample data availability, and convenience. The sample consisted of 285 male and female undergraduate students enrolled in a Midwestern university. The sample design used in the study was purposive and non-random to be inclusive in the classroom. This study used snowball sampling design; we networked through personal connections with professors to acquire appropriate samples. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study and ethical protection of human subjects was provided through the completion of the IRB's Human Subjects training.

## Data Collection Instrument

Survey statements were developed by reviewing civic engagement literature and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development. The survey included a brief description of the study, definition terms not commonly known, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality,

voluntary participation, contact information of researchers, supervising professor, IRB administrator, and instructions for completing the survey. The survey consisted of seven demographic questions regarding the participants' gender, age, major, class status, race/ethnicity, annual household income, parent level of education, 12 closed-ended statements based on a 6-point Likert scale, and an open ended question for further comments. Content and face validity were demonstrated through statements that were produced from reviewed literature and theory to accurately evaluate undergraduate students' influences on civic engagement.

### **Procedure**

The survey process began by emailing nine university professors to explain our research and asked them to collaborate with us by allowing their class to be surveyed. Purposive and snowballing sampling designs were used to select the samples. Purposive sampling was the best fit as it allowed for equitable numbers of male and female student response. The survey questionnaire was sent to all participating professors for their review. The professors cleared the survey for distribution. Five professors responded to our email with permission to survey their students. Data collection began November 5, 2015 and ended on November 16, 2015. The survey questionnaire was administered to all students present in each of the 12 classrooms surveyed. The name and purpose of the study was introduced, making it clear that participation in the survey was voluntary. We read the implied consent aloud including the description of the study, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, right to withdraw, and IRB approval statement. We then left the classroom so students did not feel obligated to participate. We instructed that completed surveys should be placed in the provided folder. The completed surveys were kept securely in a locked file cabinet in an office on the university campus until data analysis could be completed.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data was first "cleaned" and checked for missing data. Surveys with missing data were excluded from the sample. Analysis was based on male and female gender differences; therefore, not included was one respondent who self-identified their gender and two who did not identify their gender. For participants who circled more than one survey response, the higher numbered response was selected. All variables were subjected to frequency distribution analysis. Results indicated that there was no missing data. The "cleaned" surveys were then coded using acronyms for each variable.

Each demographic variable was given a three letter acronym: (GEN) Gender; (AGE) Age; (MAJ) Major; (CLS) Class Status; (RAE) Race/Ethnicity; (AHI) Annual Household Income; (PLE) Parent Level of Education. Each survey statement was also given a three letter acronym: My family has influenced me to be civically engaged (FAM); My friends have influenced me to be civically engaged (FRI); My school provides resources for me to become civically engaged (SCH); Participating in student organizations or clubs on my campus is important to me (SOC); My religious community has influenced me to be civically engaged (REL); I believe volunteering is part of being an engaged citizen (VOL); I believe that me, as one person, can make a difference in my community (MEP); American politics have a relevant effect on my life (AMP); I have an understanding of what is happening politically in the United States (USP); It is important to me to keep up with current events through news and social medias (CUE); Voting is a responsibility of U.S. citizenship (VOT); I have the time to be civically engaged (TIM).

The data was analyzed using the computer program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The individual was used as the level of analysis. Since groups were compared based on gender, the data analysis included frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, independent t-tests, and Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis. The independent variable was gender; the dependent variables were our survey statements.

## **Results**

The research question investigated in this study was: What influences male and female undergraduate student's civic engagement? Independent T-Tests were conducted, significant differences were found in four of the dependent variables: SOC, VOL, MEP, USP. Reliability testing was also completed. Refer to Table 2 below.

Hypothesis #1: We predicted that there would not be a difference between male and female's civic engagement because males and females have the same components comprising their microsystem, thus their influences to be civically engaged are the same according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development. We found mixed support for our hypothesis since there were statistically significant differences for the variables (SOC, VOL, MEP, USP). For all other survey responses (FAM, FRI, SCH, REL, AMP, CUE, VOT, TIM) both genders had similar responses and supported our hypothesis. Refer to Table 2 below.

Table 2

*Independent T-tests*

Variable	Gender				
	Males	Females	t	df	Sig.
SOC	3.98 (1.43)	4.41 (1.39)	-2.52	280	*0.012
VOL	4.24 (1.27)	4.82 (1.02)	-4.17	280	*0.000
MEP	4.34 (1.29)	4.64 (1.16)	-2.02	280	*0.044
USP	4.08 (1.21)	3.76 (1.18)	2.24	280	*0.026

*Note:* (SOC)=Participating in student organizations or clubs on my campus is important to me; (VOL)=I believe volunteering is part of being an engaged citizen; (MEP)=I believe that me, as one person, can make a difference in my community; (USP)=I have an understanding of what is happening politically in the United States.

\*significant @  $p < .05$ , two tailed. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means.

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the 12 variables (FAM, FRI, SCH, SOC, REL, VOL, MEP, AMP, USP, CUE, VOT, TIM) were a reliable index to measure the major concept: Influences on male and female undergraduate student's civic engagement. Cronbach's Alpha, a measure of reliability, was 0.760. This value indicated that the survey questions were a reliable measure of the major concept.

## Discussion

The central research question in this study was, "What influences male and female undergraduate students' civic engagement?" We hypothesized, utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development, there would be no difference between male and female civic engagement due to the similar compositions of their microsystems. Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests that there would be no difference in civic engagement of males and females because the microsystems of males and females contain the same categorical components: family, school, and neighborhood relations. The literature consulted did not address differences in gender with regard to specific influences on civic engagement. Of the literature reviewed only two studies found that females were overall more civically engaged than males (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012; Lopes et al. 2009). One study found that females were more likely to participate in ongoing volunteering (Gallant et al. 2010).

Results of the data have provided mixed support for the hypothesis. Independent t-tests were conducted, and significant results were found for four of the 12 variables. All other variables were in support of our hypothesis and supported by literature along with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development. We speculate the mixed support from the data is due to unique differences in each individual's microsystem.

Although no differences between factors influencing male and female civic engagement were hypothesized, we did find four statistically significant mean differences between variables: (VOL) I believe volunteering is part of being an engaged citizen (males 4.24, females 4.82), (SOC) Participating in student organizations or clubs on my campus is important to me (males 3.98, females 4.41), (MEP) I believe that me, as one person, can make a difference in my community (males 4.34, females 4.64), and (USP) I have an understanding of what is happening politically in the United States (males 4.08, females 3.76).

The variable (VOL) evaluated the degree to which the participant believed volunteering is part of being an engaged citizen. Gallant et al. (2010) asserts that volunteering is connected to civic engagement because of the opportunities afforded to participants that share common interests and common goals. This variable did not support our hypothesis; we found that females were more likely than males to believe that volunteering is part of being an engaged citizen. This is consistent with the study conducted by Gallant et al. (2010) asserting that the likelihood of continued participation in ongoing volunteering was higher for females. Though the literature does not address this unique statistic further, we speculate that some difference in the microsystem of females compared to males has influenced females to believe more strongly that volunteering is part of engaged citizenship.

The variable (SOC) evaluated the participant's perception that participating in school clubs or organizations influenced their civic engagement. This variable was based on the assertion from the literature that participation in extra-curricular activities is linked to future civic engagement and, in some cases, higher voter turnout (Lopes et al. 2009). Females agreed more than males that participation in school clubs or organizations was important to them. Lopes et al. (2009) does not specify a difference in participation between males and females. We speculate the difference may be that females find more fulfillment in participating with their peers through school organizations or clubs, which could be due to a difference in the ecological systems of males and females.

The remaining two variables that showed statistically different mean differences, (MEP) and (USP), evaluated the participant's belief that they,

as one person, can make a difference and that they have an understanding of what is happening politically in the United States. Lopes et al. (2009) found that future participation is dependent upon whether the young person is convinced there is a benefit to their civic actions. The same study also found that students who have knowledge of the political system and laws were more likely to be civically engaged in the future. We found that males are more likely than females to believe both variables influence their civic engagement. Lopes et al. (2009) did not delve into the differences between the two genders, however. We speculate the difference between males and females may be due to traditional gender role influences. Traditionally, males have been more involved in politics. The prestige of male politicians in our society may influence other males, increasing their interest in politics. This increased interest may lead to a better general understanding with a potential for a higher likelihood being civically engaged.

Our findings of no difference between male and female undergraduate students in the remaining variables are supported by literature. The variables (FAM) My family has influenced me to be civically engaged, (SCH) My school provides resources for me to become civically engaged, and (FRI) My friends have influenced me to be civically engaged were all derived from literature that utilized the Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988) to investigate how individuals contribute to their larger social world (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). The Social Capital Theory describes how changes in social relationships create action (Coleman, 1988). Put into the context of the study by Mahatmya and Lohman (2012), Social Capital Theory describes how social relationships contribute to civic engagement. The study asserts interpersonal relationships and social interactions, such as those through family, school and friends, positively affect civic engagement. The results from our study provide further evidence for the influence social interactions have on civic engagement. We can speculate that family, friends, and school heavily influence civic engagement due to the constant interaction with the individual and the prevalence within the individual's microsystem.

The variable (REL) My religious community has influenced me to be civically engaged was derived from literature that found religiosity is significantly related to ongoing volunteering (Gallant et al. 2010). While our findings show males and females do not perceive that their religious community influences their civic engagement, our finding of no difference between males and females is concurrent with the findings of Gallant et al. (2010). Our findings differ however in that religion may not significantly influence civic engagement as only 39.6% of males and 43% of females agreed that their religious community influences them to be civically

engaged; this is a question for future research. We can speculate that because religious communities are not included in the individual's microsystem, religion has less of an influence on civic engagement.

Survey responses to variables (AMP) American politics have a relevant effect on my life, (VOT) Voting is a responsibility of U.S. citizenship, and (CUE) It is important to me to keep up with current events through news and social medias were all found to be in support of the hypothesis. (AMP), (VOT) and (CUE) addressed the interest in political responsibility of the participant. Previous studies have found that a general disinterest in politics is linked to lower levels of civic engagement (Lopes et al. 2009). However, across the three variables, both male and female students agreed that politics had a relevant effect on their lives, voting is a responsibility of U.S. citizenship, and found importance in keeping up with current events. According to literature, this may suggest that the participants had greater general interest in politics and are more likely to be civically engaged. Additionally, interest in politics is often developed through education. Because school is a part of both male and female microsystems, we may surmise that both genders' interest in politics is formed in a similar way through schooling.

Males and females alike agreed they had the time to be civically engaged (TIM). These results supported the hypothesis. Stockemer (2012) found at least 50% of undergraduate students identified that they were able to spend time on political activities. More than half the male and female participants in our study agreed they had the time to be civically engaged. Literature has found that the amount of time spent on civic engagement is influenced by both the political interest and existing level of participation. Thus, we may speculate that male and female undergraduate students who believe they have the time to be civically engaged have higher levels of civic engagement.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation of this study was the use of non-random sampling, which did not allow us to generalize our findings to a larger population. Second, due to the location of the conducted study at a small Midwestern university, we had a less diverse population. Approximately 88% of our survey participants identified as white. Due to this skewed demographic we are unable to consider diversity or racial influences on civic engagement. A general lack of existing research on civic engagement was also a limitation of this study. With few existing research frameworks to build upon, our study had little to corroborate with in regards to gender comparisons of civic

engagement. Time was also a limitation. This study was conducted during a 16-week university course. Due to the rapid nature of the course, research had to be conducted on a strict timeframe with little room for flexibility. We were only able to consider civic engagement by comparing males and females. Though we did collect demographic data concerning socioeconomic status and age, we are unable to discuss those variables at this time.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

This study provides insight for educators about influencers of civic engagement. When teaching or discussing civic engagement, we must remember that males and females do not always find the same topics or actions to be influential in their civic engagement and therefore we must frame the topic of civic engagement in different ways to accommodate those gender differences. This study suggests that undergraduate female students find volunteering and participating in school clubs or organizations to be influential in their civic engagement. Higher education institutions or educators could then promote volunteering and club participation to female students as a way to encourage further civic engagement. This study further suggests that undergraduate male students' civic engagement is more influenced by believing they can make a difference in the world and fostering understanding of United States politics. Higher education institutions may highlight how the student can make a difference and provide more opportunities for constructive and informative conversations about current events. We believe the most important implication for practitioners that came from this study is the need for awareness that there are different influences on civic engagement between male and female undergraduate students.

### **Implications for Future Research**

It would greatly benefit the field of research to address civic engagement with a nation-wide random sampling of undergraduate students. Though voting is one facet of civic engagement, it is still noteworthy that young adults age 18-24 consistently have the lowest voter turnout (File, 2014) so addressing this lacking component of civic engagement is needed. It is recommended that future research consider gender differences in civic engagement since there are discrepancies across studies. Qualitative interviews may be used to discuss lived experiences and further speculate as to why gender differences exist for certain influences. Studies may also consider developing more in depth quantitative surveys to address why these gender differences in civic engagement exist. Future research may also consider using a longitudinal model of study to assess formation and development of influences on participants throughout the lifespan.

**Conclusion**

We hope to shed light on the significant amount of young adults whose engagement is dwindling and to question why. Our research has taken a small step by further addressing gender differences in relation to influences on civic engagement. The mixed support found through our results further reiterates the complex nature of what inspires us to become civically engaged and begs to be further investigated. Through continued research, we may learn more about the young adults of this nation so that we are better equipped to encourage participation in future generations. It is our hope that all citizens will benefit in a future that fosters the growth and development of civically engaged people.

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