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Promoting Political Participation through Service-Learning

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### **Promoting Political Participation through Service-Learning**

Politics often is seen as the domain of adults; after all, one cannot participate in a central activity of citizenship – the vote – until the age of 18. Yet, a propensity towards or away from civic involvement does not emerge suddenly at age 18 or beyond. Rather, the development of civic identity is a key task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Sherrod, 2006; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Through learning, observation, and participation in various civic experiences, adolescents are believed to develop knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that shape their citizenship behavior both in adolescence and into adulthood (Battistoni, 1997; Stolle & Hooghe, 2004; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

Interestingly, today's adolescents appear to be learning some patterns of civic engagement, while seemingly eschewing others. They are active volunteers, volunteering at higher rates than older generations, yet they lag behind other generations in terms of political activity (CIRCLE, 2005; Gibson, 2001; Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Zukin, 2002; Levine & Lopez, 2002). Large proportions of adolescents do not understand governmental structures or how political processes work, nor do they feel that they are capable of having a voice in politics and policy decisions (Lopez, et al., 2006; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 2001; Torney-Purta, et al., 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Youth participation in acts that indirectly or directly communicate their political preferences to politicians or government is particularly uncommon (Olander, 2003). Various scholars have suggested that among adolescents and youth in their 20s, voluntary activities may in fact be serving as a substitute for, rather than a complement to, political activity (Galston, 2001, 2004; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005; Walker, 2002).

This substitution phenomena may not be surprising, as today's youth receive limited exposure to politics from adult role models (Sapiro, 2004). Schools, for example, tend to avoid political instruction out of a fear of creating controversy or appearing to promote particular viewpoints (Hess, 2004). Youth often are taught only basic information about government and have little exposure to diverse political views or to other skills necessary to engage in meaningful political or policy activities (Sapiro, 2004). As a result, youth may see government as something that affects them later, not in the present (Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003), and may be ill-equipped to understand and work within larger social and political contexts.

In order to counter this dynamic and increase adolescent connections to the polity, interventions need to be intentionally designed to develop political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors among adolescents. As a widely-available and respected intervention that seeks in part to develop adolescents' civic engagement, service-learning may be particularly well-suited for this goal. In service-learning programs, youth are engaged in planned and structured service tied to curricula, and are provided opportunities to reflect on their service experiences. Service-learning offers youth the potential to develop both connections with their communities and habits of participating in community life. The emphasis in service-learning on developing adolescents' community ties suggests promise for the capacity to also increase youth connections with the polity. However, little evidence exists that current models of service-learning increase engagement of a political nature among adolescent participants. Integration of additional intervention components that are designed intentionally to help youth grow into citizens who participate in political or policy-related acts may strengthen the effects of service-

learning, and reduce an apparent disconnect between service-learning and political engagement.

To this end, a new socio-political model of service-learning is proposed. In the sections that follow, the need for a model of service-learning that promotes the development of political aspects of citizenship is discussed, the new model is described, and its theoretical and empirical basis provided. Additionally, given particularly low levels of political participation among disadvantaged youth (Lopez & Kirby, 2005; Lopez, et al., 2006; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, in press), the applicability of this model to the political development of diverse youth is assessed. Finally, practice, policy, and research implications of this model are discussed.

#### Service-learning and political participation

Service-learning enables students to transfer knowledge and experience between a classroom and a real-world setting. Because students become involved in addressing community problems in a structured environment and are able to reflect upon these experiences, positive civic impacts are expected. These expected impacts are particularly social in character; through service-learning, adolescents may develop connections with their communities and learn to become community participants (Hepburn, 1997; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006; Yates & Youniss, 1998; Youniss, et al., 1997).

Civic outcomes related generally to government, politics, and policy, however, are considered to be a long-term goal. The experiences of responsibility and greater societal involvement that come from service participation are expected to stimulate youth interest in how political processes can address the social needs they observe and lead

youth to reflect on their political ideologies (Morgan & Streb, 2001; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Some preliminary evidence supports these claims, suggesting that service-learning may be able to increase political engagement in adolescents (Billig, 2000; Morgan & Streb, 2001). However, among rigorous studies of service-learning, there is little evidence of positive political knowledge, skills or behavioral findings (Pritzker, 2007; Pritzker & McBride, 2006); one study finds a possible statistically significant relationship between service-learning participation and adolescent political attitudes (Morgan & Streb, 2001). Furthermore, few methodologically rigorous studies of service-learning measure political outcomes among adolescent participants (i.e., Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Yates & Youniss, 1998; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Accordingly, theoretical linkages between service-learning and political engagement thus far have not been substantiated. Current evidence does not show that service-learning programs produce youth who understand governmental structures and how political processes work, feel capable of having a voice in political and policy decisions, or who participate in political activity. Given current scholarly and public concern over the lack of youth political engagement, it is important to ask why the most rigorous service-learning studies rarely measure political effects. Deliberate attention to selecting outcomes and designing service-learning experiences that specifically target these outcomes is integral to implementing service-learning that helps students develop political knowledge, attitudes, and/or behavior (Melchior & Bailis, 2002; Pritzker & McBride, 2006). It may be that service-learning programs rarely intentionally seek to elicit political engagement. Perhaps this stems from a concern about avoiding controversy or promoting particular viewpoints (Hess, 2004). However, development of

citizens who are capable, efficacious, and interested in participating in political activity does not necessitate a partisan approach. Youth can be taught how to effect change, without promoting a particular type of change. They can learn to value public debate and expression of opinions in a political arena, without indoctrinating them into a particular viewpoint.

Interventions that seek to increase engagement in political forms of social change are likely to produce stronger political outcomes when youth are exposed to policy and political processes, rather than focusing solely on social forms of engagement. Such exposure may well serve as a bridge between the growing interest and involvement in social activities among today's adolescents and the political sphere they appear more likely to avoid. Without structured exposure to values associated with political disagreement and conflict, youth may continue to see the political arena as negative and something to stay away from when they encounter conflict (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Niemi & Junn, 1998).

#### A socio-political model of service-learning

Claims that civic interventions can produce increased adolescent civic engagement are common. In various bodies of work, at least ten different intervention forms have been posited to produce positive civic outcomes in adolescents. Successful elements of these various interventions are borrowed to inform the development of a stronger, politically-oriented model of service-learning. This socio-political service-learning intervention includes six primary components:

1. Service participation to meet a community need;
2. Discussion-based learning;

3. Reflection that is critical in nature;
4. Youth decision-making;
5. Group-based activity; and
6. Politically-oriented activity tied to the service.

It is expected that these six components in combination will lead to increased adolescent political participation. Not all of these components are posited to have a direct relationship with political participation; instead, many of these components are hypothesized to affect political knowledge, skills, or attitudes that may precede political participation. The following sections provide theoretical and empirical support for the inclusion of each of the six intervention components, and their posited links to political engagement, and participation in particular.

*Service participation to meet a community need*

Service clearly is a central component of any model of service-learning. The link between involvement in service activities and political engagement derives from two sets of developmental theories: identity development and cognitive development. Erikson (1968) identified the development of identity, including civic identity, as a central task of adolescence. Youniss & Yates (1998; 1997), among others, have extended this work to suggest that adolescent participation in activities in which they contribute to the public good and model others in doing so leads to the development of civic identity. This civic identity includes a feeling of connection to one's community and a sense of internal efficacy, i.e., that the individual can make a difference civically. Cognitively-oriented theories (Bandura, 1977; Dewey, 1951) suggest that the actual experience of participation

may lead to positive socially-oriented civic attitudes, and in the long-term, to political participation.

In the implementation of service-learning, service may take a range of forms. For example, Moore and Sandholz (1999) studied a series of service-learning programs ranging from tutoring and mentoring younger children to serving as escorts to school visitors, with stronger outcomes from the off-campus service. Although not always the case, best practices of service-learning suggest that service be targeted specifically to a community need. Connecting service activity to the public interest may be particularly relevant for political development (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). By participating in meaningful service, adolescents may develop an understanding of larger community needs and thus learn why continued civic engagement is important (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). Through such activity, whether it be direct service, community organizing, serving on an agency board, etc., adolescent participants are expected to develop knowledge about community and political structures and increased efficacy, which may in turn contribute to political participation.

#### *Discussion-based learning*

A key characteristic of service-learning is the linkage between youth service participation and educational curricula. In order to elicit political outcomes, academic content can be taught in such a way to incorporate youth discussion of political issues that relate both to their studies and to their service. There is growing empirical support for the civic benefits of engaging youth in discussions of topics that are political in nature. In recent years, classroom discussion of political and/or current events

consistently has been found to positively impact adolescent political development (e.g., Campbell, 2005; CIRCLE, 2003; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, et al., 2001).

The socio-political service-learning model calls for inclusion of adult-facilitated discussion within the academic component of service-learning. Through discussion and debate of differing views, adolescents may learn that issues of community well-being can be seen from multiple perspectives and identify the value of adding their own voices to communal discussions and debates (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Enabling youth to discuss current events and political issues relevant to their service experiences may have a direct positive impact on their political skills. Specifically, youth will learn to link their localized service experiences with larger political issues and processes and to engage in deliberative discourse.

#### *Reflection critical in nature*

One of the “essential elements” of service-learning is reflection on the service activity before, during, and after service (Billig, 2000; National Service-Learning Cooperative, 1999). This central component of the service-learning intervention model is influenced greatly by the work of Youniss and Yates (1997), as well as Eyler (2002; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Youniss and Yates posit that reflection on service activity, whether orally or in writing, helps youth to process their experiences and accordingly, to develop civic identity. Reflection has become a key indicator of “quality” in service-learning interventions, and is expected to help youth link their service experiences with both classroom content and with larger social issues beyond their local service setting (e.g., Billig, et al., 2005). However, in practice, the quality of service-learning reflection ranges widely.

Ginwright & Cammarota (2002) distinguish the reflection they see as common to service-learning from the “critical” reflection that they suggest will result in increased desire to engage in social and political action. This “critical” reflection involves connecting the social problems and issues youth see in their local environment with larger, more global social, political, and economic issues. Through critical reflection, youth are guided by an adult leader through a process of questioning the social phenomena they see and experience through service and the sources of such phenomena. They are encouraged to examine issues of social justice as they relate to their local service experiences, and to connect their experiences to the political realm.

It is expected that critically-oriented reflection will lead youth to develop skills in identifying possible targets for change (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Watts & Guessous, 2006b). Moreover, critical reflection is likely to impact youth’s political attitudes, increasing internal political efficacy and impacting external efficacy either positively or negatively. As Kahne and Westheimer (2006) note, reduction in external efficacy is not necessarily a negative outcome; instead negative attitudes about government’s responsiveness to citizens may contribute to increased political activity for some youth.

#### *Youth decision-making*

Student participation in selecting, designing, implementing, and evaluating their service activities is also a key element of service-learning (Billig, 2000; National Service-Learning Cooperative, 1999). The effects of youth involvement in decision-making around their civic activity have received less attention in the field than some of the other components discussed here, but also have theoretical support. Youth making specific

decisions regarding the type and nature of their civically-oriented activity has been linked to positive political outcomes, particularly in terms of internal political efficacy (e.g., Flanagan, 2003; Morgan & Streb, 2001). Checkoway (1998) compared various forms of youth participation in their communities, and found anecdotally that youth who are empowered to carry out their own civic activities and to make their own decisions have stronger feelings of efficacy, in turn possibly resulting in future political action.

On a broad level, service activities which involve youth in community- and governmental-level decision-making are posited to elicit positive social and political attitudes. Youth participation in processes of governmental decision-making is expected to lead them to build civic attitudes, including agency and a sense of themselves as citizens (Driskell, Bannerjee, & Chawla, 2001; R. Hart, 1997; Matthews, 2001; Woolley, Spencer, Dunn, & Rowley, 1999). Likewise, youth involvement in decision-making on a community level may contribute to community attachment and a sense of efficacy (Camino, 2005; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Checkoway, et al., 2003; Pittman, 2002; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Based on this work, it is expected that active decision-making by youth about and in their service and related political action will result in increased internal political efficacy, which in turn may positively impact political behaviors.

#### *Group-based activity*

In a comparison of civic interventions, the component which has been found most consistently to have positive civic impacts on youth (and adults) is involvement in organized activities, distinct from school curricula (Glanville, 1999; Kirlin, 2003; Pritzker, 2006, 2007; Smith, 1999; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Zaff, Moore,

Papillo, & Williams, 2003). Theoretical support for the civic effects of group-based activity derives from the social capital (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003; Stolle & Hooghe, 2004) and civic voluntarism (Verba, et al., 1995) theoretical perspectives. Both approaches posit that organizational membership will have positive civic outcomes, leading to increased political participation. The social capital approach argues that organizational involvement results in the development of social trust and networks necessary for participation. Within the civic voluntarism model, organizational involvement is believed to be a key source of the skills necessary for political participation.

Group-based participation in service-learning can demonstrate to students that civic engagement is not necessarily a solo act (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003), and can help youth to develop a sense of collective identity, seeing themselves as part of a “social contract” (Flanagan, 2003; Flanagan, Bowles, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998). Moreover, group work can teach adolescents to negotiate among their different perspectives and to resolve differences, skills important for participation in the political arena (Flanagan, 2003). However, it is common in service-learning programs for youth to serve independently at different sites, perhaps coming together as a group for instruction and/or reflection.

Consistent with Kahne and Westheimer’s (2003) call for providing youth with a supportive peer community in order to develop citizenship, the socio-political service-learning model suggests that substantial elements of service-learning should take place in a group setting, creating a community of peers engaged in civic activities together. For example, youth may participate together on service or work as a group to plan and engage

in politically-oriented activity. Through group-based experiences, it is expected that youth will gain key civic skills and attitudes that can contribute to their political participation.

*Politically-oriented activity tied to service*

Recent scholarship suggests that while youth involvement in service activities can result in positive socially-oriented civic outcomes, it may not necessarily lead to positive political engagement (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Pritzker, 2006; Pritzker & McBride, 2006). Youth seem to want to make changes to society, but are increasingly finding social-oriented activities to be more satisfying and to result in meaningful change, as opposed to a political system seen as distant, complicated, and untrustworthy. Recent work by Kahne & Westheimer (2006) suggests that interventions (i.e. community service, service-learning) that involve feel-good, successful contributions to society and that are oriented to the development of internal efficacy may contribute to this trend. They argue that instead, youth need opportunities to engage with politics and government and to understand the complexities inherent in bringing about societal change.

Kahne & Westheimer's (2006) work, as well as critiques by other political scientists about the emphasis on social engagement in much civic engagement work (e.g., Galston, 2001), influence the inclusion of a political activity component in this intervention model. Youth can plan and participate in political activity that stems from, and is tied to, their service. This activity can be partisan, but certainly does not need to be. It can take place in the political arena, involving public officials and/or policy, but does not require youth or the institutions sponsoring service-learning to support a particular political candidate or to take a side on controversial political issues. For

example, youth can write letters to politicians, develop policy proposals, or testify before a local city council about an issue of concern identified through their service; potentially non-partisan examples include increased support for neighborhood safety, services for the homeless, or after school programming for children. Such political activity is expected to impact adolescents' external political efficacy, and have a direct, positive effect on political participation (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006).

#### Applicability to diverse youth

This socio-political model of service-learning may be particularly effective in increasing political engagement of youth in disadvantaged circumstances. As the following section describes, various aspects of disadvantage are negatively associated with political participation. As a result, interventions that can target political engagement among disadvantaged youth are needed; specific elements of this model targeted to the needs of disadvantaged youth are discussed below.

Theoretical and empirical support for a negative relationship between various aspects of disadvantage and youth political engagement is substantial. For example, race and ethnicity have been found to be associated with lower levels of engagement. Recent surveys connected with the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (e.g., Lopez & Kirby, 2005; Lopez, et al., 2006) show that minority youth are less likely than white youth to vote or report intentions to vote; to find government responsive or to trust government; and to engage in an array of political behaviors. Low socio-economic status and low educational levels also have been found to significantly predict low political engagement (Verba, et al., 1995). Less advantaged youth report lower levels of civic knowledge than more advantaged youth (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001).

Youth over 18 without a high school education participate in political activities at a lower rate than youth with a high school education; likewise, working youth participate less than youth attending college (Lopez, Kirby, Sagoff, & Kolaczowski, 2005). In addition, various other populations that may experience disadvantage are at risk for low levels of civic engagement, including youth with disabilities (Skelton & Valentine, 2003), homosexual youth (Russell, 02), and immigrant youth (Stepick & Stepick, 2002).

Moreover, a civic gap may exist across diverse communities, indicating unequal distribution in access to civic interventions (Finlay, Flanagan, & Black, 2007; Levinson, 2004; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005). There is theoretical and empirical support for a negative relationship between living in a disadvantaged community context and political engagement. For example, residence in a high density area or in an ethnically homogeneous area may predict lower levels of youth political participation (Gimpel, et al., 2003; Lay, 2003). Residence in a poor neighborhood may have a negative impact on access to resources available for civic development, and thus on youth engagement (Atkins & Hart, 2003; D. Hart & Atkins, 2002; O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003).

Substantial conceptual work suggests that participation in civic interventions may reduce negative impacts of disadvantage on youth civic engagement (Checkoway, et al., 2003; Cohen, 2006; Ginwright, 2006; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; Watts & Guessous, 2006b). Although the components of the socio-political model proposed here have not yet been tested in combination, various individual elements of the model suggest promise for increasing political engagement among disadvantaged youth (e.g., Kirshner, et al., 2003; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999).

For adolescents living in struggling communities, service and/or political action focused on development and change within their own community may be influential (Checkoway, 1998; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Kirshner, et al., 2003; O'Donoghue, 2006). In such instances, decision-making through organizing and leading activities focused on community change can empower youth who may otherwise lack civic agency; Checkoway (1998) suggests that disadvantaged youth are likely to become civically engaged when they organize community change.

Service-learning that encourages disadvantaged youth to see their own experiences with disadvantage as a springboard to civic action, rather than as a deterrent, may be particularly effective. For example, when youth perceive themselves as victims of discrimination or oppression, the development of critical thinking skills and critical awareness and participation in efforts to bring about social change may be key aspects of intervention (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Watts & Guessous, 2006b; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). Preliminary research suggests that critical reflection and participation in service and political action may complement each other, leading to future change-oriented action by disadvantaged youth (Ginwright & James, 2002; Watts & Guessous, 2006a).

Education and discussion about social movements within the discussion-based learning component also may be useful in developing political knowledge and skills among disadvantaged youth, as they learn about previous social change efforts on the part of disadvantaged groups (Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Lacoé, 2006; Lewis-Charp, Yu, Soukamneuth, & Lacoé, 2003). Reflection on service experiences may be particularly effective in eliciting political engagement among disadvantaged youth; for

example, Finlay, et al. (2007) found a positive association between reflection and the exercise of political voice among disadvantaged youth.

### Implications and Conclusion

The socio-political service-learning model proposed here is offered to elicit discussion about how service-learning can be strengthened as a tool to create young citizens who see themselves both as social *and* political actors in the civic sphere. This model stems from theoretical claims that service-learning can promote political development (e.g., Yates & Youniss, 1998). Service-learning is a promising strategy for connecting youth civically; however, thus far, it has not shown success in developing citizens who believe themselves able to negotiate the political arena and who possess strong behavioral tendencies to do so (Pritzker, 2006; Pritzker & McBride, 2006). With greater attention to implementing service-learning programs that are intentionally designed to elicit politically-engaged citizens, we may be better equipped to halt the trend away from political involvement among today's youth.

This paper offers one model for strengthening service-learning as a politically-oriented intervention. It calls attention to complementary components that can be integrated into current models of service-learning in order to increase political engagement. Central to this model is the opportunity for adolescents to have experiences as political actors that are directly relevant to their service activity. Additionally, this model calls for inclusion of discussion and reflection on larger socio-political issues related to youth service into the reflection time already existing in service-learning models. Through exposure to politics and government, adolescents can become attuned to the significance of the political sphere to their lives and the issues they care about.

Moreover, through political activity, they can develop a sense of themselves as capable of being politically involved and can begin to create habits of political participation in addition to volunteerism. This may be particularly relevant for disadvantaged youth who have limited exposure to the political arena.

Despite the theoretical potential of such a socio-political service-learning model, implementation may face barriers in practice. Public schools, in particular, may be hesitant to incorporate “political” components. While their concerns may be understandable, it is worth noting that politics and partisanship are not synonymous. Adolescents can be provided opportunities to develop political efficacy and interest in the affairs of government, without being taught to take a specific stance. They can experience the workings of government – for example, by presenting their own research to the city council on the benefits of building a playground in their neighborhood – without become embroiled in political controversy. Moreover, even discussion of controversial political and current events can take place in a way that encourages youth to develop discussion and deliberative skills, without adult promotion of a particular viewpoint (Hess, 2004). From a policy perspective, training opportunities on the facilitation of political discussion and activities may well be necessary for widespread implementation of a socio-political service-learning model.

Increased integration of political components into service-learning may also face policy-level obstacles. Governmental support, e.g., in the form of grants, may be less likely than for service-learning focused on social forms of civic development. As illustrated by past debates over Motor-Voter legislation, policy efforts to increase

participation in traditional political activity among current non-participants may be controversial (Piven & Cloward, 1988, 2000).

Despite these obstacles, this socio-political model of service-learning suggests a possible avenue for challenging the current trend for youth to avoid the political arena and to see themselves as incapable of having a voice in policy decisions. Further, it offers potential as a model that can engage youth living in disadvantaged circumstances, who may be disinclined to engage politically and who are offered few opportunities to gain political skills or experience norms of political participation (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Fuchs, Minnite, & Shapiro, 1998; D. Hart & Atkins, 2002). Empirical tests of this proposed socio-political model, with attention to measuring the effects of each component, are important steps in the development of service-learning that can contribute effectively to a new generation of politically-involved citizens. In particular, empirical attention to the effectiveness of this socio-political model among disadvantaged youth can be an important contribution to identifying effective means of eliciting political engagement among youth most likely otherwise to remain disengaged.

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