

Building Civic Environments to Empower Citizens

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Whereas scholars typically conceive of voting as an individual act, it is important to recognize that civic engagement is communal in important ways as well. My research suggests that our inclination (or disinclination) to participate in civic life is shaped in part by the civic environments in which we live, especially by the presence or absence of key groups and institutions within these environments (Widestrom 2015).¹ Mobilizing institutions within communities—including voluntary associations, churches, and political parties—serve as training grounds for citizens to learn the skills of civic engagement and as key connections to public officials. Distressingly, however, my research demonstrates that residential segregation along economic lines dramatically affects the presence and efficacy of these institutions and, therefore, the well-being of civic environments and civic life within neighborhoods.

In this article, I argue that there are specific steps that policy makers and political scientists can take to strengthen civic environments within communities—especially segregated, impoverished communities—to increase civic engagement among all citizens. Specifically, I argue that policy makers could build stronger civic environments by promoting inclusive housing and zoning policies as well as civic education in K-12 schools. I also suggest that political scientists could support these efforts by conducting research on the efficacy of various policy tools that promote more integrated residential spaces; by advocating for more inclusive zoning and housing policies and better civic education at the local and state level; and by urging professional organizations to work with policy and education experts to improve civic education for youth.

The idea that civic environments affect individual civic and political participation is still relatively new, although recent research is starting to demonstrate its potency (Campbell 2006; Oliver 2001; Widestrom 2015). My own work demonstrates that economic segregation has an important and distinct relationship to civic engagement, particularly associationalism, civic and political mobilization, and political behavior—specifically, voting (Widestrom 2015). In fact, controlling for a host of factors that also shape political behavior, I found that economic segregation, measured by the dissimilarity index (Massey and Denton 1993, 284), has a statistically significant and negative relationship to voter turnout. However, this varies depending on economic context: economic segregation depresses turnout in all but the wealthiest counties.²

This occurs because higher levels of economic segregation within an area create isolated resource-deficient or resource-rich communities, producing vicious and virtuous cycles that affect civic engagement and political participation. Specifically, the segregation of poverty and wealth concentrates a host of neighborhood-level resources that are important for vibrant civic environments (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Widestrom 2015). Moreover, the concentration and segregation of poverty or wealth alters the composition of residents within neighborhoods, producing “lower levels of collective efficacy” in impoverished communities due to diminished individual resources and higher levels of collective efficacy in prosperous ones, as suggested by Soss and Jacobs (2009, 123). Economic segregation, therefore, affects political behavior by changing the nature of neighborhood resources and the spatial arrangement of efficacious citizens.

In this story, civic environments are the neighborhood contexts that do or do not contain the resources to advocate for neighborhoods or to fight policies that harm neighborhoods. This includes strong local voluntary associations and churches as well as aggregate community features, such as stable neighborhoods and family units, social and economic assets, and safe neighborhoods. From this perspective, the well-documented trend in declining civic engagement among low-income citizens is not driven simply by individual impoverished citizens opting out of political life (Bartels 2008; Griffin and Newman 2013; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Instead, civic environments within isolated impoverished neighborhoods create circumstances that diminish civic engagement among the least advantaged in society, whereas those within segregated prosperous neighborhoods promote engagement among those who are better off. In other words, place matters, and the civic environment in which a person lives can affect the attitudes and dispositions that they develop toward political process and participation in civic life. To better understand this, we must identify neighborhood features that promote active associationalism and civic mobilization within a community and how these might be strengthened if they are found to be lacking as a result of this economic segregation.

I found that three specific features of neighborhoods are particularly important in understanding the health of civic environments and civic engagement in a community. First, two aspects of neighborhood life are important for promoting *neighborhood stability*: residential stability and stable family households. Residential mobility in impoverished communities tends to be quite high and works to destabilize

entire neighborhoods. As one community leader I interviewed in Rochester, New York, said, “If I register a hundred people in this community, a month from now at least fifty of those people will no longer be at the [same] address” (Turner 2006),³ making civic engagement and mobilization difficult. Second, non-traditional family structures do not alone undermine healthy civic environments and active civic engagement. However, single-parent and grandparent-led households often lack the

strengthening civic environments and empowering citizens. First, they should advocate for the development of mixed-income communities and housing developments. The theory is that by desegregating impoverished, underserved communities, the problems associated with weak civic environments within them—neighborhood instability, weak social and economic networks, and unsafe streets—also are made more diffuse. Moreover, integrated residential spaces can develop a

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economic and social resources to promote household stability, and they disproportionately live in segregated low-income neighborhoods. Therefore, it is essential that community leaders and policy makers determine the extent to which neighborhoods are residentially stable by examining housing turnover rates as well as key sociodemographic traits of communities.

Second, demographic changes, deindustrialization, and residential mobility also have undermined *social and economic assets* within segregated impoverished communities. These changes further undermine stable families, social networks, and strong economic ties, which are vital for maintaining vibrant civic environment and organizational capacity. To this end, examining the strength of social and economic networks determines the arrangement of social and economic assets in a community. This also is helpful in determining whether there are communal sites where these networks could flourish (e.g., churches, community centers, and other gathering places), as well as whether there are neighborhood organizations that allow residents to pool social and economic resources to address community issues.

Third, *safe neighborhood spaces* are important for fostering a feeling of security. Without this, neighborhood residents are not willing to attend neighborhood meetings or social events, which results in low levels of social trust because neighbors are afraid to engage in the community, including simply talking with one another (Widstrom 2015). Many tools and resources are available to determine the safety of specific communities.

Examining these three features can determine whether a community has the resources and assets that would allow voluntary associations and churches to thrive. This is vital because these organizations are the conduits through which civic and political mobilizations happen, by these institutions as well as by public officials. Without these institutions, the type of mobilization necessary to promote civic and political engagements declines.

If we take seriously this proposition that vibrant civic environments are vital for promoting civic engagement, we also must take seriously the challenge of revitalizing civic environments in all communities to cultivate a more active citizenry. Specifically, there are three ways that policy makers can begin

sense of shared fate among residents, thereby promoting collective engagement around neighborhood joys and concerns. Several types of policy tools promote mixed-income communities, such as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development HOPE VI program, which is intended to promote dense, transit-friendly, and economically integrated communities (Fraser, Chaskin, and Bazuin 2013).

An alternative way to accomplish mixed-income housing is to ramp up pursuit of more inclusive zoning laws and reform exclusionary zoning laws that allow some neighborhoods to “zone out” certain types of housing. Inclusionary zoning is a land-use policy intended to enable lower- and moderate-income households to live in middle- and upper-income communities. Typically, this is accomplished by mandating or encouraging housing developers to set aside a certain number or percentage of units to be rented or sold at below-market prices or by allowing previously excluded types of development to occur (Schwartz et al. 2012). In other words, an alternate route to socioeconomic integration may be to pass more robust inclusionary zoning laws so that previously exclusive communities become more inclusive over time. Political scientists could support these efforts by conducting additional research on the efficacy of these policies and by using their expertise to advocate for effective policy at the local and state levels.

A second way that policy makers could strengthen civic environments is to invest in local civic and faith-based institutions. If these institutions serve as sites for developing social capital and as conduits for connecting public officials to citizens (Collins et al. 2014; Lewis et al. 2013; Widstrom 2015), they must be active and robust. Cities can do this by creating inclusive decision-making mechanisms; for example, Atlanta created Neighborhood Planning units to magnify the voices of neighborhood residents in the urban-planning process. Policy makers also could do this by developing programs that incentivize capacity building—for example, through subsidy and grant programs.

Third, community leaders could educate citizens about the various civic and faith-based organizations in their city or region. Many cities and counties already maintain lists of civic

organizations, and/or leaders could draw on data maintained by other organizations (e.g., Association of Religion Data Archives). Increased local educational outreach regarding all of these resources would be beneficial, perhaps through library and community-center programming. Political scientists could

development. Finally, policy makers and political scientists also should work to enhance civic education in the United States, which could promote active civic engagement among young citizens. In these ways, policy makers and political scientists could promote engagement by focusing on the

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support these local educational efforts by using their expertise to become involved in them.

Fourth, policy makers and political scientists should work together to enhance and promote civic education across the country, with a focus on fostering active and long-lasting civic disposition among youth. According to a report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), “only eight states include social studies in their assessments of school performance, and only 10 states require civics or government teachers to be certified in those subjects” (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge 2013). In a report published by the National Association of State Boards of Education, Kawashima-Ginsberg (2016) notes that no states offer educational programming that includes four features identified as critical for promoting civic engagement among youth: (1) understanding the role of parties in the electoral politics; (2) understanding the ideological profile of the major political parties in the United States; (3) situating controversial issues within the political and ideological landscape of American politics; and (4) understanding where the students themselves fall on the political and ideological spectrum (Kawashima-Ginsberg 2016). As a result, young people do not have a sufficient grasp of the electoral and political landscape that could encourage them to become active members in American civic life. Boosting civic education could be accomplished by strengthening state requirements and standards that allow for flexibility but that also make it a priority in K-12 education (Kawashima-Ginsberg 2016). Additionally, political scientists could use their professional organizations as vehicles for advocacy efforts supporting better civic education and to develop educational tools and programming.

In summary, whereas scholars typically conceive of voting as an individual act, I contend that civic engagement is more communal than many recognize because civic dispositions and efficacy are learned within neighborhoods and communities. The mobilizing institutions within these environments, including voluntary associations and churches, serve as training grounds for citizens to learn the skills of civic engagement and provide key connections to public officials, and the aggregate socioeconomic and demographic features of a neighborhood provide for the development of social capital and trust. Given the relationship among economic segregation, civic environments, and civic engagement, policy makers should promote economically integrated communities that could improve social capital, institutional capacity, and network

residential and educational spaces we occupy and where we learn the skills of citizenship. ■

NOTES

1. Research discussed in this article is drawn from my book, *Displacing Democracy: Economic Segregation in America* (Widstrom 2015).
2. For more on this, see the Introduction to *Displacing Democracy: Economic Segregation in America* (Widstrom 2015), especially pages 14–16.
3. Names of interview subjects have been changed to protect anonymity.

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