

Research Statement

My research investigates core questions on when and how political participation takes place. I consider three primary lines of inquiry. First, I examine inequalities in youth civic participation. Second, I study the internal dynamics of existing social movement groups, particularly focused on participant recruitment and commitment. The third line of research expands upon studying movement participants to include the role of state dynamics in social movement mobilization.

Inequality in civic participation is a major concern facing both scholars and practitioners. My master's thesis expanded current research on changes in youth civic participation over time to include questions of inequality. Although scholars found that participation varies by sociodemographic characteristics, my research considered whether participation gaps between groups have expanded or contracted over time. To examine these changes over time, I utilized quantitative methods on nationally representative survey data of high school students. I traced youth civic engagement from the 1970s to the current time considering how participation has changed, whether it varied by sociodemographic group, and how the gaps between sociodemographic groups changed over time. I found that over time youth participation shifted from formal participation in the political sector to volunteering, with major discrepancies in participation by socioeconomic groups. Between socioeconomic status groups, I found evidence that gaps in political participation between groups are decreasing, while differences in participation between women and men is increasing, and race-based inequality remains constant. These results offer mixed evidence of the persistence of inequality in political participation in the U.S. democratic system. This paper is currently being prepared for submission to *Youth and Society*.

Civic associations are a primary point of contact through which youth become involved in civil society and politics, and my dissertation contributes to the scholarly discussion on what leads organizations to be effective at stimulating active citizenship, and how inequality operates in those settings. One solution employed by practitioners and touted by scholars as a means to create equality in organizational participation is employing democratic participatory practices. My dissertation utilizes comparative ethnography, survey research, interviews, and quasi-experimental problem solving groups to explore further questions around equality in civic participation. The work on participation in organizations, including work places, suggests that inclusive participation of rank-and-file members decreases inequalities and barriers to entry in these settings. I argue that adultist treatment of youth is a major barrier to participation, the impacts of which increase inequalities and decrease the acquisition of civic skills and knowledge.

Beyond impacting youth experiences in organizations, the extent of decision-making in youth participation also shapes youth ability and desire to participate outside the organizations. Utilizing problem solving groups such as those employed in studying work place dynamics, I proposed realistic hypothetical scenarios to groups of youth in the organizations I observed as a way to evaluate their civic learning and desire for future participation. When youth were given autonomy over decision-making in organizations, they responded more readily and could collectively formulate responses to the issues presented. This portion of the dissertation calls into question the assumptions from survey research that youth civic participation generates further participation, and adds the importance of considering context and type of participation. This research is supported by both the Odum Fellowship and a UNC Graduate School Dissertation Completion Grant and will be a book-length manuscript.

A second line of my research considers the internal dynamics of social movement groups using movement-generated “big data”. In a piece published in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change*, my co-authors and I questioned existing assumptions that online social movement participation operated differently from offline participation. We utilized theories on social movement communities (SMCs) to conceptualize a new form of cultural support for activism—the social movement online community (SMOC). Using data from Stormfront, the largest online community of white nationalists, and qualitative coding, we found that many characteristics of SMOCs paralleled those of offline SMCs. Our findings broaden discussions of online versus offline participation, and we argue for including SMOCs as a way for scholars to conceptualize and study social movements that use the Internet to form their collective identity. Further challenging existing assumptions about the role of online activity in offline mobilization, my co-author and I considered the case of the Occupy Movement. After downloading the data from Facebook with a custom scraper, we qualitatively coded postings across more than 300 Occupy Facebook groups. We found that Facebook served as a platform to recruit adherents and resources to the movement, as well as to share information across movement participants. This work is published in *Social Movement Studies* and online through the *Social Science Research Network*. This line of inquiry also served to bring movement-generated content to the forefront of discussions on the connections between online and offline movement emergence and persistence.

In my third line of research, I go beyond internal movement dynamics to include movement interactions with targets, primarily the state. Challenging the long-standing claim by social movement scholars that material adversity does not lead to mobilization, my co-author and I utilized cross-national data on 145 countries along with quantitative methodologies to consider the role of grievances. Studying demonstrations that took place between 1960 and 2006, we found that when we controlled for factors at the state-level such as population size and democratic governance structure, there was a statistically significant negative relationship between economic growth and contentious acts. These findings highlight the need for social movement scholars to take seriously the role of grievances in social movements. This work was revised and resubmitted to *Social Problems*. In work that further investigates how social movements interact with the state, my co-author and I analyze how movement-state interactions led to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In work published in *Sociological Forum*, we sought to answer the question of how movements propelled the Kennedy administration into action. We examined the logic of primarily indirect responses by state actors to local protests, arguing that response was motivated by an effort to avoid racial conflict through a dual strategy of garnering voluntary compliance and support for future legislation. Both pieces contextualize the importance of state decisions for producing or diffusing social movement mobilization.

I have already begun several projects that will shape my future research agenda, and I have plans for several more, a few of which I will discuss here. First, my research on youth civic participation thus far indicates that primarily privileged youth gain the benefits of participation in organizations, which drives me to want to learn more about recruitment into organizations. I also am currently working to expand my research on the Occupy Movement to consider interactions with the media, and how the movement created the discursive change often referred to as the movements’ largest outcome. As I expand my research agenda, I will continue to contribute to understanding how inequality shapes political participation.