

# The Civic Engagement Gap(s): Youth Participation and Inequality From 1976 to 2009

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**Sarah Gaby<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

Civic participation in the United States is highly unequal, resulting in a “civic engagement gap” between socioeconomic, racial, and gender groups. Variation in civic participation and the civic engagement gap remain contested, primarily as a result of inconsistent definitions and measurement issues in previous work. Using consistent measures from the Monitoring the Future Study from 1976 to 2009, I analyze whether sociodemographic gaps in youth civic participation changed during a period of growing income inequality. I find that since the 1970s, electoral participation decreased, volunteering increased, and social movement activity remained constant. Participation varied by sociodemographic group, with highly educated Whites most active in all activities. Females volunteered more than males, but participated at the same rate in all other activities. The gap between male and female volunteering increased over the time period, as did the socioeconomic gap in volunteering. Racial gaps in participation, however, remained relatively stable from 1976 to 2009.

## Keywords

youth, civic engagement, inequality, political participation, volunteering, social movements, civic engagement gap

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<sup>1</sup>University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Sarah Gaby, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 155 Hamilton Hall, CB #3210, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3210, USA.

Email: [sgaby@unc.edu](mailto:sgaby@unc.edu)

By a number of formal measures such as female workforce participation and presidential voting rates, equality in the United States increased since the 1970s. This trend is in part due to policies like Title IX that seek to reduce discrimination and increase institutional equality. Yet, simultaneously income inequality increased, exacerbating disparities. Scholars studying how sociodemographic group disparities affect civic life identified a “civic engagement gap” with differential participation by race and socioeconomic status group (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Political inequality in the United States is “one of the most significant and troubling [inequalities]” (Verba, 2001, p. 2), as democracy depends on equal participation in public and private spheres (Almond & Verba, 1989). Political inequality has even led the U.S. government to pass policies that seek equal access to civic participation (e.g., Voting Rights Act). While these policies may decrease formal participation barriers and produce expectations that unequal civic participation is decreasing, this is not resolved and the question remains open: Have race, gender, and socioeconomic status disparities in participation declined?

Studies of trends and participation gaps in civic engagement produced contradictory findings as a result of both measurement and definitional issues, which may produce unreliable estimates and questionable validity. Thus, this line of inquiry has not yet determined whether participation gaps are contracting or expanding over the past 40 years. For instance, Putnam’s (2000) work revealed major declines in civic engagement since the 1950s, which he attributed to declining U.S. social capital. Other scholars, however, found that declines in civic engagement are overstated and participation varies by cohort. For example, Jennings and Stoker (2004) found that levels of civic engagement are declining among Generation X (born 1965-1984) but not among Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), who participate at similar levels to previous generations.

Some researchers argue that participation shifted instead of declined (Hustinx, Meijs, Handy, & Cnaan, 2012). In this view, Putnam’s measures of social capital show declines in certain activities, but the declines are a result of an increasingly dense organizational landscape that produces competition in participation. This competition led civic participation to shift to arenas like volunteering. As a result of these shifts in civic participation, “...civic America is being renewed and extended, not diminished” (Ladd, 1999, p. 5).

Participation trends vary depending on the forms of civic engagement considered (Paxton, 1999). For instance, youth are trading political participation for volunteering (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & DelliCarpini, 2006). This may be due to recent emphasis on volunteering and service over political engagement (Zukin et al., 2006), or as a result of changes

in available civic opportunities. Civic realignment also likely shapes *who* participates, including differential participation by sociodemographic groups. In past work, civic engagement was almost exclusively measured in adults, failing to capture a major portion of U.S. society—youth. Youth are an important group to study, as they represent a critical source for creating societal change (Flanagan & Levine, 2010), and unequal participation among youth leads to unequal adult participation (Finlay, Wray-Lake, & Flanagan, 2010). In addition, civic participation positively influences youth, providing a way to build social networks and capital (Flanagan & Levine, 2010), shaping understandings for their later adult social participation (Finlay et al., 2010), and buffering against negative physical and psychological health outcomes (Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, civic participation early in the life course strongly predicts adult participation (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; McFarland & Thomas, 2006).

To address youth civic participation and inequality, I first consider baseline participation from 1976 to 2009 for three types of participation: electoral politics, volunteering, and social movement activities. I then analyze variation among sociodemographic groups (ethnoracial, socioeconomic status, and gender), and civic engagement gaps between those groups (e.g., female vs. male participation over time). I consider two specific questions that clarify understandings of differential participation: (a) *How did levels of electoral politics, volunteering, and social movement participation (collectively civic engagement) change across sociodemographic groups from 1976 to 2009?* and (b) *How did participation gaps between sociodemographic groups vary from 1976 to 2009?*

To resolve inconsistencies and measurement errors that complicated past work, I utilize consistent measures for youth over time. I find that during the period, youth participation in electoral politics decreased, while volunteering increased and social movement participation remained relatively constant. I also find that highly educated Whites participated most in all activities. From 1976 to 2009, gaps between sociodemographic groups persisted for participation in social movement activities and electoral politics, but gender and socioeconomic-based gaps increased for volunteering. Racial participation gaps remained relatively constant in all activities.

## **Civic Engagement and Unequal Participation**

Defining civic engagement is a challenging proposition because there exists little scholarly consensus. Broadly, “civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that

difference . . . through both political and non-political processes” (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi). While definitionally broad, the operationalization of civic engagement focuses on differentiating activities like political and nonpolitical, which operate differently (Edwards & Foley, 1998). Zukin et al. (2006) distinguished political from civic engagement. Political engagement typically indicates “participating in the electoral process.” Nonpolitical engagement “refers to participation aimed at achieving a public good . . . usually through direct hands-on work in cooperation with others . . . and rarely touches upon electoral politics” (e.g., volunteering; p. 51).

Further distinguishing political activities, scholars point to variation between conventional political participation and nonconventional participation like social movements (Youniss et al., 2002). Although social movements may use “conventional” political approaches (e.g., campaign donations), the tactical repertoire that distinguishes this form of participation consists of behaviors like “rallies, demonstrations, marches, and even civil disobedience tactics” (Meyer, 2007, p. 100).

Challenging the differentiation of civic activities, scholars argue that boundaries between activities are fluid. For instance, volunteer activities may also involve participating in political processes (Lee & Wechsler, 2015). Moreover, civic participation may be a “continuum between formal political acts such as voting, political actions such as protesting for a moral cause, and performing a service such as working in a rural literacy campaign” (Youniss et al., 2002, p. 136). These critiques point to the failure of some quantitative data to accurately describe participation contexts and interactions. For instance, in this study, it is not possible to differentiate between compulsory (e.g., school required) and volunteer service.

Building on these conceptual debates, it is evident that the patterns of participation vary for different types of civic activities. Thus, scholars should examine self-reported experiences in a broad range of civic activities, as this approach also allows for comparisons between the various activities. In this article, I ask whether civic engagement gaps between groups changed from 1976 to 2009. Following Zukin et al. (2006), I first consider how participation in different types of civic activities operates, and then examine inequality in participation. Although past work aggregated several activities (Klandermans, van der Toorn, & van Stekelenburg, 2008; Youniss et al., 2002; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), establishing boundaries between activities is critical as they operate differently (Edwards & Foley, 1998). I use existing theoretical constructs to categorize civic activities by mode (e.g., protest), combining tactical categories based on theoretical similarity and in line with previous analytical approaches (see Syvertsen et al., 2011). Models for the variations in the component behaviors are available from the author.

I focus on three categories: electoral politics, volunteering, and social movement participation. Electoral politics refers to conventional forms of engagement in the electoral process. Volunteering encompasses several activities that contribute to the community through helping behaviors (Wilson, 2000). Social movements are forms of “collective, organized, sustained and noninstitutional challenge[s] to authorities, powerholders, or cultural beliefs and practices” (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009, p. 4). Youth may participate in movements in various ways. At times, youth lead policy change efforts (Lee & Wechsler, 2015), organizing for social and political change, while in other instances they struggle for leadership roles in adult-led movements (Gordon, 2010). As a result of these complexities, this study utilizes self-reports of participation. In the subsequent sections, I address theoretical foundations for each participation mode.

### *Electoral Politics*

Although the United States had a vibrant civic culture in the 1960s (Almond & Verba, 1989), scholars have since identified declines in electoral and political participation (Martin, 2012; Syvertsen et al., 2011; Gastil, 2000), spanning several decades. Trends in electoral participation also vary by age group and activity (Zukin et al., 2006), and there is some evidence that Millennials (born 1978-2000) are much more politically engaged than their predecessors (Greenberg & Weber, 2008). Although voting may be declining, this opens opportunities for other forms of less institutional participation, like petition signing (Dalton, 2008). Voting is only measured periodically during elections (Quéniart, 2008) and many youth cannot vote, so scholars also consider other conventional forms of electoral engagement such as writing elected officials, which steadily declined from 1978 to 2001 (Syvertsen et al., 2011). Events like the 2008 presidential election can also increase engagement. For example, 2008 youth voter turnout was one of the highest in recent history and spurred an increase in youth campaign volunteering (Fisher, 2012). Although the 2008 election may have temporarily increased participation, these moments unlikely create persistent participation. This leads to the first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Youth electoral participation decreased since the 1970s.

### *Volunteering*

Studies of volunteering are inconclusive about participation trends. In 2000, Putnam noted overall declines, although he also found volunteering increased from 1975 to 1999, particularly for adults age 60 and above. Other scholars

also found nonlinearity, with declines in the 1970s ceasing and even reversing in the 1980s and 1990s (Galston & Levine, 1998). In particular, the millennial generation is committed to volunteering (Epstein & Howe, 2006). Other scholars argue that volunteering increased for youth and adults alike from 1976 to 2005 (Syvertsen et al., 2011), with rates during this period more than doubling in social service or charity work (Ladd, 1999). Using Monitoring the Future (MTF) data and others, Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman (2012), confirmed volunteering increased, likely due to proliferating high school service requirements accompanied by growing opportunities and social pressures.

**Hypothesis 2:** Youth volunteering increased since the 1970s.

### *Social Movement Participation*

Recent work shows social movement participation increasing from 1973 to 2008 (Caren, Ghoshal, & Ribas, 2010; Dalton, 2006, 2008), assessments that concur with earlier results (e.g., Soule & Earl, 2005; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998; Tarrow, 1994). Although Putnam (2000) found a 10% decline in petition signing from 1970 to 1995, Dalton's converse findings support the broader consensus on increased participation. Still others note that protest was stable from 1987 to 1994 (Verba et al., 1995).

A dominant claim in movement literature is that "protest has become so common that it is now the extension of conventional political action by other means" (Dalton, 2008, p. 91), simply a routine form of politics (McCarthy & McPhail, 1998). Yet, some warn against overstating protest participation, noting that while protest attendance increased over time, variation exists by period and cohort (Caren et al., 2010). Inconclusiveness results from both the activity measured and measurement error. Often, data are not representative due to small sample sizes resulting from the rarity of protest participation. Still, the increasing institutionalization of protest has also increased participation (Caren et al., 2010).

**Hypothesis 3:** Youth social movement participation increased since the 1970s.

### *Unequal Participation*

Scholars compare civic participation by race, socioeconomic status, and gender. In the following, I address how differential participation operates in each type of activity across sociodemographic groups.

*Electoral Politics.* Equal participation strengthens democracy, yet scholars note race, socioeconomic, and gender inequalities. For instance, males participate at relatively higher rates in institutionalized political activities (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Pilati, 2011), although females are more likely to vote (Fisher, 2012). Higher socioeconomic status individuals also participate at higher levels than lower socioeconomic status peers (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995; Walsh, Jennings, & Stoker, 2004; Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012). In part, this operates along familial lines, with middle-class parents more civically involved than others, and therefore raising more involved children (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Beyond these baseline inequalities, few scholars address changes in participation gaps, such as how widening social class inequalities result in increasingly unequal engagement (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999; Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012).

Race-based effects in political activities are less clear. Blacks generally participate at lower rates than Whites (Wray-Lake & Hart 2012), especially when they are geographical minority populations (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990). Strategies that specifically engage Black voters are successful at increasing participation, such as during the 2008 election when the highest increase in voter turnout occurred for Black youth (Fisher, 2012). This increase essentially eliminated the racial gap in voter turnout in 2008 (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009). Despite these isolated positive results, research overwhelmingly shows that Whites have more opportunities to engage in electoral politics than non-Whites (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

*Volunteering.* Volunteering is relatively common, yet inequality in participation remains. Past research indicates males either volunteered less than females (Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997; Wuthnow, 1995), or found no significant variation (Musick, Wilson, & Bynum, 2000). Theoretical reasons for any gender variation are not well developed. Wilson and Musick (1997) contended that females volunteered at higher rates due to their participation in activities conducive to volunteering like child rearing and attending church.

Racial inequalities in volunteering also exist. Whites volunteer about one and a half times as often as Blacks (Musick et al., 2000). Blacks are asked to volunteer less than Whites, and accept invitations to volunteer less often (Musick et al., 2000). However, when Blacks do participate they dedicate more time and perceive the benefit of participation to be greater than that of Whites (Tang, Copeland, & Wexler, 2012). As with electoral participation, socioeconomic status is positively correlated with volunteering (Musick et al., 2000; Sander & Putnam, 2012; Sundeen, Garcia, & Raskoff, 2009; Wuthnow, 1995). Some scholars found higher socioeconomic status youth

increasingly engaged in volunteering from 1975 to 2009, while lower socioeconomic status youth volunteer rates remained constant (Putnam, Frederick, & Snellman, 2012).

**Social Movement Participation.** Social movement participation is also unequal. Early dominant approaches focused on biographical availability (the ability of an individual to participate based on work, life, and family constraints). These studies found males participated in social movements at higher rates than females because they had fewer restrictions (e.g., child rearing; McAdam, 1986), although more recent work found no gender difference in protest participation (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006; Schussman & Soule, 2005). Biographical advantages of higher socioeconomic status lead to increased participation (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006; McVeigh & Smith, 1999; Verba et al., 1995).

Although earlier studies indicated Whites protest more than non-Whites (Verba et al., 1995), more recent work indicates that after controlling for socioeconomic status, African Americans are most likely to attend a protest or demonstration (Caren et al., 2010). While African Americans were significantly more likely and willing to protest than Whites (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006), this effect was explained by including measures that accounted for political engagement and structural availability (e.g., political interest and knowledge; Schussman & Soule, 2005). Unlike conventional politics, protest has been a major part of the tactical repertoire for non-Whites since the Civil Rights Movement (Caren et al., 2010).

**Hypothesis 4:** Higher socioeconomic status is correlated with increased participation in all activities.

**Hypothesis 5:** Males participate more than females in political and social movement activities, but volunteer at the same rate.

**Hypothesis 6:** Whites participate in electoral politics and volunteering more than non-Whites, but participate less in social movement activities.

### *Participation Gaps Over Time*

As noted above, few scholars considered whether inequalities between sociodemographic groups change over time. McCarthy and Zald (1973) suggested that upsurges in civic participation in the 1960s to 1970s might have resulted from the changing U.S. sociodemographic landscape. A dated exploration along these lines demonstrated that as social barriers for women diminished from 1952 to 1977, political engagement increased (Welch, 1977).



Accounting for differences like college education and employment, by 1972, females were participating more than males in activities like working for political parties. More recently, Schussman and Soule (2005) pointed to the equality of protest participation across gender groups over time as “evidence of a diminishing gender gap in [protesting]” (p. 1089). In contrast, scholars identified a widening gap across socioeconomic groups in volunteering (Putnam et al., 2012), a declining gap in nonvoting political participation (Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012), and a persistent gap in protest (Caren et al., 2010). Caren et al. (2010) argued that “the types of individuals who viewed protest as a viable political tactic in the 1970s—liberals, the well-educated, union members, and people living on the coasts—were roughly the same 35 years later” (p. 22).

Identities like female and Black are less restrictive in the 2000s than 1970s, and combined with recent research point to the possibility that the influence of sociodemographic identities on participation changed. However, there is no consensus, as scholars have not gained much traction on understanding changes in sociodemographic participation gaps over time.

**Hypothesis 7:** Race, gender, and socioeconomic status-based participation gaps in each activity remain constant over time.

## Research Design

Past work on changes in civic engagement and sociodemographic participation gaps has been limited and divided into subfields. This work is restricted by critical measurement issues, scaled measures that obscure the differences between domains of participation, short time periods, nonnationally representative samples, and inconsistent measures. In part, these limitations are due to methods for overcoming data unavailability like compiling several surveys, severely biasing the data. Furthermore, for uncommon activities like protest or campaign donations, data utilized are often unrepresentative due to small sample sizes. To overcome these challenges, I utilize the MTF survey, which uses consistent question construction from 1976 to 2009 to ask 12th graders about their participation in various civic activities (Johnston et al., 2006). These data were collected using multistage random sampling: Students were selected by geographic areas, then schools, then classrooms within schools. Up to 350 students were selected per school, and sampling weights were used to account for unequal probability of selection at all stages (Johnston et al., 2006). Students responded through self-administered, machine-read questionnaires in their classrooms.

A limitation of these data is that they only capture U.S. 12th grader responses. This reduces the generalizability of the findings, although rising adults are an essential population representing a key intersection between childhood and adult participation. Also some variables have limited variation, which may restrict analysis. Furthermore, collection began in 1976, after a major period of social movement activity in the United States and cannot account for the effect of potentially elevated levels prior to the study. However, many important elections and events occurred and the time period is long enough to account for numerous societal changes.

In addition, the data do not capture the context of civic participation. Reliance on the mode of participation accounts for targets of action (e.g., elected officials), but not content (e.g., claims) or specific roles (e.g., leader). In addition, possible indicators are limited. For instance, although social movement participation can take many forms, the data only include some forms of protest or boycott participation. Furthermore, participation in various activities may overlap, such as volunteering leading to engagement in political processes (Lee & Wechsler, 2015). Understanding participation more broadly and including claims, targets, and interactions of various civic activities should be considered in future work. However, the measures utilized capture youth self-perceptions of participation in various activities. Despite its limitations, the MTF survey is a unique and underutilized data source targeted at understanding change over time (see Twenge et al., 2012). Therefore, this study measures changes in civic participation from 1976 to 2009 by considering several tactics or modes of action across various sociodemographic groups.

### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variables are dichotomous measures capturing whether an individual participated in electoral, volunteering, or social movement activities that year. Electoral participation includes doing *any* of the following: writing an elected official (12.25%), donating money to a candidate or political cause (3.86%), or working on a political campaign (5.93%). While measures like donating money to candidates are rare in 12th graders, the large sample allows for a critical mass of participants. I do not include voting, which is nonlinear, only occurs during election periods, and some respondents are not voting age in election years. The exclusion of voting is common when studying youth participation (see Quéniart, 2008).

The dichotomous variable for social movement activity includes whether an individual participated in a boycott (8.54%) *or* protest (lawful demonstration) (4.15%). The volunteering measure includes whether an individual participated in community affairs or volunteer work (72.61%) and is coded to

include *any* volunteering—a few times a year, once or twice a month, once a week, or daily. Never volunteering is the excluded category. The measure does not specify that volunteering be noncompulsory. The vast majority of volunteers of both races reside in the “few times a year” category. This category also has the highest racial participation disparity. As a result, including all categories of participation presents a more realistic view of volunteering and is consistent across all measures, where the threshold is any participation.

### *Explanatory Variables*

I also include a set of explanatory measures including survey year and individual demographics. The year variable is divided into decades to allow comparison with the 1970s, the portion of the data set closest to a period of elevated levels of political and social movement engagement (Wilson & Simon, 2006). The main effects are robust to modeling by year, in 5-year increments, and with a series of functions (year<sup>2</sup>, year<sup>3</sup>, etc.). Following past work, a measure for socioeconomic status is based on students’ report of parental education, and coded to take the value of the parent with the highest education level. Educational levels include not completing high school, not completing college, receiving a college degree, and attending graduate school. I also include gender measured by self-identification as male or female, and race, which includes Whites and non-Whites (Black or African American and Hispanic including Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and “other Hispanic”). This variable represents all racial categories in the publicly available data set. These sociodemographic categories are used to analyze participation gaps between groups.




### *Control Variables*

I also include control variables capturing influential factors on participation identified in past scholarship. I control for political party affiliation including Democrat, Republican, Independent, and no affiliation (not selecting a political affiliation). I control for frequency of religious service attendance (e.g., once per week or more, once to twice a month, rarely, and never) as well as the student’s school region (south, west, northeast, northcentral). Control and explanatory variables are presented in Table 1. Findings for these variables are not presented due to space limitations (available by request).

### *Method*

I use logistic regression to evaluate changes in electoral, volunteering, and social movement participation from 1976 to 2009. These models allow for

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Observation	Description	M	SD	Distribution by year
<b>Dependent variables</b>					
Electoral behaviors	53,887	Dichotomous variable	0.18	0.38	
Volunteering	53,887	Dichotomous variable	0.73	0.45	
Social movement activities	53,887	Dichotomous variable	0.10	0.31	
Decade	53,887	Year of survey by decade	1988	13.60	
<b>Demographics</b>					
Less college	50,868	Parents have less than a college degree	0.46	0.50	
College	50,868	Parents have a college degree	0.28	0.28	
Graduate school	50,868	Parents went to graduate school	0.20	0.20	
Male	53,887	—	0.52	0.50	
Non-White	53,887	Non-Whites including Black and Hispanic	0.15	0.36	
<b>Control variables</b>					
Region	53,887	Region of student's school	—	—	
Northeast	53,887		0.23	0.42	
Northcentral	53,887		0.31	0.46	
South	53,887		0.35	0.48	
West	53,887		0.11	0.32	
Political party	53,887	Self-reported political party affiliation	—	—	
Democrat	53,887		0.32	0.47	
Republican	53,887		0.33	0.47	
Independent	53,887		0.05	0.23	
Other/no affiliation	53,887		0.30	0.05	
Religious attendance	53,887	Religious institution attendance	—	—	
Never	53,887		0.12	0.33	
Rarely	53,887		0.35	0.48	
1-2 times/month	53,887		0.17	0.38	
1/week or+	53,887		0.36	0.48	

dichotomous comparisons between participants and nonparticipants. In all models, I include sociodemographic and control variables. To examine changes in the sociodemographic participation gaps, I include interactions between these explanatory variables and the decade variables.

**Table 2.** Logistic Regressions for Participation in Political Behaviors, Volunteering, and Social Movement Activities.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Electoral behaviors	Volunteering	Social movement activities
1980s	-0.376*** (0.04)	-0.0532 (0.04)	-0.447*** (0.05)
1990s	-0.618*** (0.04)	0.158*** (0.04)	-0.045 (0.05)
2000s	-0.530*** (0.04)	0.385*** (0.04)	-0.0666 (0.05)
Less college	0.199*** (0.07)	0.180*** (0.05)	0.470*** (0.10)
College	0.467*** (0.07)	0.410*** (0.05)	0.733*** (0.10)
Graduate school	0.824*** (0.07)	0.755*** (0.06)	1.220*** (0.10)
Male	-0.0324 (0.03)	-0.467*** (0.02)	0.0269 (0.03)
Non-White	-0.413*** (0.05)	-0.222*** (0.04)	-0.347*** (0.06)
Constant	-1.421*** (0.08)	0.0432 (0.07)	-2.152*** (0.11)
Observations	50,868	50,868	50,868
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.0254	.0738	.0315

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

\* $p < .1$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

## Findings

Analysis of youth civic engagement produced several findings. I begin by addressing variations in each of the behaviors from 1976 to 2009, presented in Table 2. I then discuss the impact of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Finally, I explore the results of changes in race, gender, and socioeconomic gaps as seen in Table 3.

Table 2 depicts increases in volunteering, decreases in electoral participation and relative consistency in social movement participation from 1976 to 2009. Even controlling for changes in demographic factors, Model 1 in Table 2 indicates participation in electoral activities decreased significantly over time. The findings presented are based on predicted values and significance

**Table 3.** Change in Explanatory Variables Over Time.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Electoral behaviors	Volunteering	Social movement activities
1980s	-0.23 (0.15)	0.213* (0.12)	-0.174 (0.23)
1990s	-0.456** (0.21)	0.243 (0.15)	0.11 (0.29)
2000s	-0.510** (0.23)	0.384** (0.16)	0.172 (0.27)
Less college	0.299** (0.12)	0.231** (0.10)	0.602*** (0.18)
College	0.685*** (0.13)	0.440*** (0.11)	0.805*** (0.19)
Graduate school	0.830*** (0.13)	0.596*** (0.12)	1.395*** (0.19)
Male	-0.0565 (0.06)	-0.260*** (0.06)	0.157** (0.08)
Non-White	-0.470*** (0.11)	-0.121 (0.09)	-0.15 (0.14)
1980s# Less college	-0.145 (0.16)	-0.168 (0.12)	-0.371 (0.24)
1980s# College	-0.369** (0.16)	-0.235* (0.14)	-0.32 (0.25)
1980s# Graduate school	-0.0779 (0.17)	-0.032 (0.15)	-0.307 (0.25)
1990s# Less college	-0.211 (0.22)	0.0322 (0.15)	0.0288 (0.29)
1990s# College	-0.21 (0.22)	0.089 (0.16)	0.147 (0.30)
1990s# Graduate school	-0.0178 (0.22)	0.319* (0.17)	-0.000561 (0.30)
2000s# Less college	-0.0357 (0.23)	0.127 (0.16)	-0.0759 (0.28)
2000s# College	-0.209 (0.24)	0.272 (0.17)	-0.0655 (0.29)
2000s# Graduate school	0.0474 (0.24)	0.523*** (0.18)	-0.26 (0.29)
1980s# Male	0.04 (0.08)	-0.190*** (0.07)	0.124 (0.10)

(continued)

**Table 3. (continued)**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Electoral behaviors	Volunteering	Social movement activities
1990s# Male	-0.0415 (0.08)	-0.267*** (0.08)	-0.386*** (0.10)
2000s# Male	0.0851 (0.08)	-0.335*** (0.08)	-0.171 (0.10)
1980s# Non-White	0.122 (0.13)	-0.0277 (0.11)	-0.301* (0.18)
1990s# Non-White	0.0591 (0.14)	-0.148 (0.12)	-0.159 (0.17)
2000s# Non-White	0.0136 (0.14)	-0.173 (0.12)	-0.248 (0.17)
Constant	-1.507*** (0.12)	-0.107 (0.10)	-2.362*** (0.18)
Observations	50,868	50,868	50,868

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

\* $p < .1$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

testing using the Wald test (Cameron & Trivedi, 2010). Holding constant the sociodemographic characteristics and controls in the model, about 24% of 12th graders participated in electoral activities in the 1970s, which dropped to roughly 18% in the 1980s, to 15% in the 1990s, and slightly elevated to 16% in the 2000s. One possible explanation for the 1990s decline is that these elections were not as contested as elections that took place earlier in the time period (Marcelo, 2008).

Conversely, volunteering increased significantly in the 1990s and 2000s compared with the 1970s. Whereas in the 1970s, about 72% of respondents reported volunteering, 75% reported volunteering in the 1990s and 78% reported doing so in the 2000s. In contrast, participation in social movement activities was only statistically significantly different between the 1970s and 1980s, during which time it decreased. In the 1970s about 12% of youth in the survey reported participating in social movement activities, which fell in the 1980s to about 8%. There was no statistically significant difference in social movement participation in the 1990s or 2000s compared with the 1970s. These findings confirm the first two hypotheses; electoral participation has decreased and volunteering has increased, but disconfirm the third, with no change in movement participation.

There are also statistically significant effects of sociodemographic characteristics on each outcome. Across all models, an increase in parental education is significant and positively correlated with increased participation in each activity. This finding supports Hypothesis 4. Individuals from the highest socioeconomic bracket are almost twice as likely to participate in electoral activities as those from the lowest parental education level (parents who did not complete high school), where about 13% participate (in comparison with about 24%). There is a similar volunteering disparity, with about 67% of those from the lowest parental education level likely to volunteer, compared with about 81% of those from the highest parental education level. The socioeconomic group gap is also large in social movement activities, where individuals in the highest socioeconomic group are at least three times more likely to participate than those in the lowest group.

Differential participation for males compared with females are only statistically significant and negatively correlated for volunteering, holding other demographic elements constant. For example, net of all other factors, about 78% of females volunteer compared with 70% of males. Gender does not play a significant role in either electoral behaviors or social movement activities. This does not offer support for Hypothesis 5. Males participate less than females in volunteer activities, and there is no statistically significant difference for participation in the other activities. Racial differences are consistent across all models, with a statistically significant and negative correlation between non-Whites and each behavior. For example, about 74% of Whites volunteer, while only about 70% of non-Whites do so. Similarly, 11% of Whites participate in social movement activities in comparison with about 8% of non-Whites. Roughly 18% of Whites participate in political behaviors, compared with about 13% of non-Whites. These findings offer mixed support for Hypothesis 6.

Analysis of the variation in the impact of the explanatory variables over time, presented in Table 3, is less straightforward, and offers mixed support for Hypothesis 7. For example, there is no evidence that the socioeconomic participation gap changes over time in electoral or social movement participation. The advantage for higher socioeconomic status youth in civic participation remains persistent over the time period. There are, however, positive and statistically significant relationships between volunteering in the 1990s and 2000s and high socioeconomic status. In the 1970s, about 79% of those from the highest socioeconomic group volunteered compared with 65% from the lowest group; this disparity increased by the 2000s as 85% of those from the highest group participated versus 73% of those from the lowest group. In regard to volunteering, the influence of socioeconomic status increased over the time period for the group from the highest parental education level.



Changes in gender-based participation over time indicate increasing inequality in volunteering and social movement activities for some years. Since the 1970s, male participation in volunteering increased. In the 1970s, holding other factors constant, about 69% of males volunteered, although this was down to 67% by the 1980s, up to 70% by the 1990s, and up again to 74% in the 2000s. The ratio of female to male participation was about 1.07 in the 1970s, 1.12 in the 1980s, 1.13 in the 1990s, and 1.12 in the 2000s. This indicates that inequality in volunteering between males and females increased since 1976. However, the impact of being male in the 1990s compared with the 1970s is statistically significant and negative for participation in social movement activities. While in the 1970s about 13% of males participated in social movement activities, by the 1990s only about 10% participated, but the gap returned to the 1970s level in the 2000s. By the 1990s, females were statistically significantly more likely to participate in social movement activities than males, although this effect also returned to 1970s levels in the 2000s. Electoral participation did not vary by gender over this time period.

There is very little support for changing racial inequality in participation over time. Non-Whites are as likely as Whites to participate in social movement activities in the 1970s, but they become less likely to participate in the 1980s. While in the 1970s about 12% of Whites participated in social movement activities versus about 11% of non-Whites, in the 1980s, overall participation decreased. However, the differential increased between racial groups such that about 8% of Whites participated in social movement activities in the 1980s compared with about 5% of non-Whites. Again, the relationship returned to 1970s levels by the 1990s. There is no evidence that racial inequality changes over time for volunteering or political behaviors.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Civic participation has changed over time, but remains unequal. Youth participation in electoral politics declined from 1976 to 2009, while volunteering increased and social movement participation fluctuated but remained relatively constant. By the 2000s, youth were equally likely to protest or boycott as participate in electoral politics. However, participation is unequal. Higher socioeconomic status leads to greater participation in each activity. The socioeconomic participation gap in volunteering increased from 1976 to 2009. Males are less civically engaged and volunteer less often than females. Since 1976, the gender inequality gap increased in volunteering and remained constant in social movement and electoral participation. Across all activities, non-Whites participate less than Whites. Racial participation gaps in all activities are persistent. These disparities indicate increasing importance for

future research to address mechanisms that shape unequal participation over time.

Although data include most high school age students, home-schooled individuals, incarcerated persons, and high school dropouts are excluded. An estimated 15% to 20% drop out before graduation (Johnson et al., 1999), primarily ethnoracial minority youth (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). Drop-out rates were lower in the 1980s to 2000s than in the 1970s, which may increase inclusion of ethnoracial minority youth in the sample. Incarcerated youth are also excluded, and incarceration rates increased from 1974 to 2000 (Pettit & Western, 2004). Excluding incarcerated individuals undercounts ethnoracial minority youth who are increasingly incarcerated at higher rates than Whites. However, the highest risk group for incarceration is 20 to 30 year olds (Pettit & Western, 2004), and therefore exclusion is likely minimal in this study. Groups excluded from the sample are a relatively small percentage of the population and any systematic exclusions unlikely bias the results significantly, but should be considered in future research. Findings from this study only extend to 12th-grade youth enrolled in high schools.

My findings indicate that claims about steep declines in civic participation are overstated. If we consider the last two decades, civic engagement is on the rise. In addition, these findings emphasize the importance of considering civic behaviors separately, as evidenced by differential variation in electoral politics, volunteering, and social movements. Specific activities, such as declining electoral participation, may drive identified participatory trends. Furthermore, youth are increasingly engaged in civic life over the period, and, if the findings on persistence of participation throughout the life course are accurate (e.g., Finlay et al., 2010; McFarland & Thomas, 2006), should continue to be into adulthood.

I cannot empirically test some possible influential factors leading to changes in civic and differential group participation, but I believe future work should explore several components. The growth of volunteering and simultaneous decline in electoral activities indicates shifting social priorities and structures for supporting participation that may also shape unequal participation. Emphasis on volunteering is mirrored by high school service requirements and the proliferation of community youth organizations (McAdam & Brandt, 2009). Skocpol (2003) argued that availability of organizational opportunities drives the type and extent of participation. However, opportunities are distributed unequally, with higher socioeconomic status groups accessing a greater extent of opportunities (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Although various types of organizations can transfer civic skills and knowledge that lead to participation (Baggetta, 2009), civic organizations are disproportionately located in higher socioeconomic status communities (Watts &

Flanagan, 2007), increasingly serving and being utilized by middle-class youth since the 1970s (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Snellman, Silva, Frederick, & Putnam, 2015). High school service requirements likely contribute to increased demand for volunteer opportunities, and access to civic opportunities in high school also privileges higher socioeconomic status and White student participation (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

While providing opportunities is important, the persistence of civic engagement gaps, especially by race, illustrates that providing engagement opportunities for previously marginalized or disengaged populations is equally, if not more critical (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Critical civic engagement provides one approach—by engaging marginalized populations in collaborative work with diverse peers, thereby broadening their viewpoints to better position them in their communities, youth from various backgrounds can gain sociopolitical awareness (Mira, 2013). In addition, urban youth can become engaged through tangible community improvement projects they create accompanied by skill-based training on community change (Shiller, 2013). For current practitioners, findings presented here suggest that focusing on day-to-day programming, operation, and fundraising may need to make way for considerations about how structures of inequality change and influence participation.

While scholarship on inequality in civic participation is increasing, it merits further attention. Patterns of inequality are extremely persistent, and, like neighborhoods and schools, civic organizations reproduce inequalities. For minority youth, homogenization of civic organizations since the 1970s along with the influence of organizational norms that quell dissent (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005) may promote racial inequalities in participation. Furthermore, decreases in organizational opportunities for minority and economically disadvantaged participants exacerbate unequal participation (Skocpol, 2003). The impact of high school service requirements on equality remains unclear, because connection with college admissions may further increase gender inequality as the college attendance gap between males and females is increasing. Concerted efforts are needed to understand inequalities and increase socioeconomic, gender, and racial diversity in civic engagement.

Overall, declines in civic engagement for U.S. youth are overstated, but disparities in participation between sociodemographic groups remain troubling. This new line of inquiry contributes to existing work by indicating that race, gender, and socioeconomic gaps are tenacious. These trends demonstrate a lack of progress toward becoming a more inclusive civil society. The conversation on civic engagement trends, then, should move away from extent of engagement to focus on unequal engagement.

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### Author Biography

**Sarah Gaby** is a PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She studies youth, social movements, and inequality.