

Civic participation can bridge social-class segregation

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Research from U. of I. labor professor Richard Benton says there's a strong correlation between civic participation and improving the prestige of one's social network. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Good news for the Leslie Knope, Lisa Simpsons and other civic-minded strivers of the world: New research from a University of Illinois expert in social network analysis indicates that people who participate in voluntary civic organizations such as school PTAs, religious or leisure

groups strengthen their ties to high-status people and accrue significantly better social cachet than their less-outgoing peers.

According to a new paper from Richard Benton, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois, there's a strong correlation between civic participation and improving the prestige of an individual's social network.

"It turns out that participating in voluntary civic groups may be a crucial social activity in reducing social capital deficits and fostering the ties that bridge the divide between upper- and lower-class status lines," Benton said.

The study, which will be published in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Social Networks*, examines the role that civic engagement plays in expanding and strengthening ties across social milieus and in affecting social capital deficits. It uses nationally representative data on adults in the U.S. that draws on several summary measures, including a "position generator" approach to measuring an individual's social capital.

The paper's findings suggest that civic participation influences the relationship between one's own social position and access to high-status social network contacts - that is, to people with power and influence.

"Ordinarily, a person's social class is a strong predictor of the status of his or her network contacts. People tend to know others who are socially similar to themselves and this means that low-status individuals tend to suffer social capital deficits and to know fewer high-status people," Benton said. "These findings indicate that, independent of one's own social class background, civic participation improves an individual's access to high-status network contacts but also helps strengthen people's relationships with high-status contacts."

Shared social spaces such as the workplace, schools and neighborhood are particularly important for forming non-kin relationships, but these settings are typically segregated by social class traits, Benton said.

"By excluding relationships that form around these settings, I am able to zero in on the network contacts that people have met through engagement in voluntary civic groups," he said. "It turns out that voluntary civic organizations such as churches and recreation clubs are particularly important for building ties that expand and strengthen a person's social network and their social capital, particularly their access to high-status contacts."

Although civic groups can be segregated into cliques that may reinforce existing social ties among "in-group" members, results suggest that they have a moderating effect.

"Civic organizations act as a social hub where individuals can form personal networks that reach across a diverse array of occupations throughout the occupational hierarchy," Benton said. "Plumbers and lawyers may not interact all that much in the work world, but when they participate in a civic organization, they've both broadened the diversity of their respective social networks."

In other words, it's not all about hobnobbing with the rich and powerful at exclusive events.

"This effect could occur even at what most would consider somewhat mundane organizations," Benton said. "Do you attend a religious institution regularly? Do you belong to a recreational sports league? Do you go to the neighborhood association meetings? It's the people you meet there."

And it's also not just about the intensity with which someone

participates. It's the variety, according to Benton.

"Participation in a few isn't going to do it," he said. "It's participation in a broad spectrum of groups and having access to people across a range of statuses."

For job seekers looking to expand their social circle, having "a ton of contacts" in a certain sector isn't as helpful as having a diverse network, Benton said.

"From a social capital perspective, we know that having a very diverse network is generally more valuable than a network that is focused around an insular social group," he said. "You might know many people, but you know them all through one setting. That's really not the best way if you're job hunting. It's more productive to have a diverse network. Participating in a diverse number of settings increases your access to diverse contacts."

In the "Bowling Alone" era of declining civic participation, "You could argue that, over time, civic participation will play less of a role in building [social capital](#) or fostering bridging ties," Benton said.

"There's some evidence that participation in voluntary civic organizations is down," he said. "Attendance at religious institutions is down. People participating in everything from bowling leagues to community and voluntary organizations - the trend is downward. The declining prominence of these important social settings is likely to contribute to increasingly insular networks among Americans and, in particular, increased social distance between high- and low-status people."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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