Civic engagement does not improve well-being

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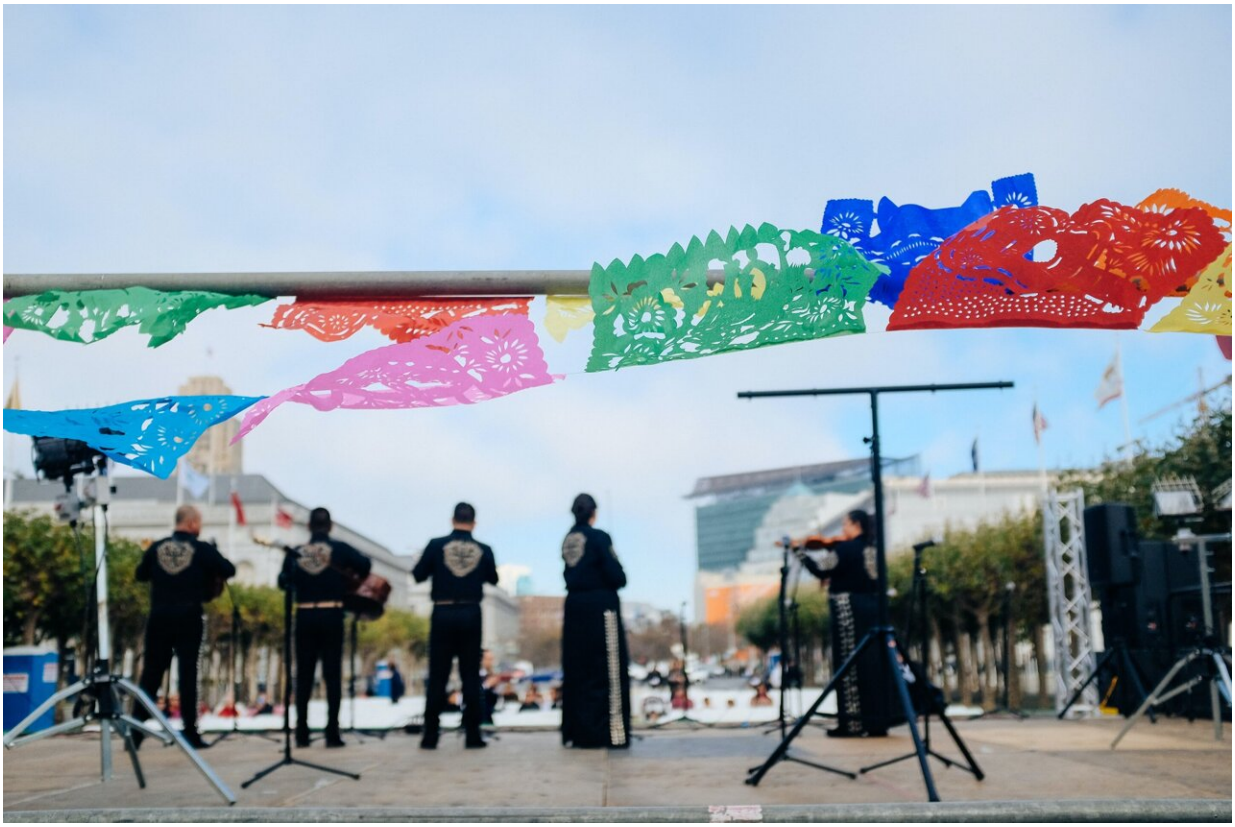

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Whether somebody engages civically or not, does not substantially influence their well-being. This is the central finding from two recent studies from Germany and the UK, conducted by researchers from the

Universities of Vechta and Bochum. The studies were published in *Journal of Happiness Studies* and in *Social Indicators Research*. These results run contrary to the assumption that civic engagement contributes to well-being of engaged persons.

Voluntary fire brigades, food banks, homeless shelters or citizens' initiatives: The opportunities for civic engagement are manifold. Civic engagement brings structure and meaning to the lives of engaged individuals and hence makes these happier and more satisfied—at least that is a widespread belief among researchers and lay people. In old age in particular, civic engagement is thought to compensate well for lack of paid work or of family responsibilities. However, the assumption that civic engagement appreciably improves well-being cannot be confirmed by their data, say Matthias Lühr, research associate at the University of Vechta Maria K. Pavlova, a professor in Vechta, and Maike Luhmann, a professor at the University of Bochum.

The researchers analyzed already existing datasets. Lühr, Pavlova and Luhmann utilized data from 17,720 and 18,550 survey participants, who reported on the frequency of their political (for instance, in political parties or citizens' initiatives) and non-political (such as church-related) voluntary engagement. Their well-being was assessed via multiple indicators (such as life satisfaction, emotional well-being, low loneliness and control beliefs). The researchers tried to find out whether the participants reported higher well-being in the years when they were comparatively more civically engaged (or engaged at all) than in the years with lower or no civic engagement.

The answer was "no," with few exceptions. Both in Germany and in the UK, older adults did appear to benefit from non-political engagement because their life satisfaction was higher in the years when they were more frequently engaged. However, this difference was small and not observed for other well-being indicators. Other leisure activities, such as

socializing with friends and acquaintances, sometimes showed more pronounced associations with participants' well-being, also in old age.

It is well possible, admit the researchers, that civic engagement boosts well-being of engaged individuals in certain contexts, depending on their needs, on where the activity takes place, on its content and finally on the society and culture. Such benefits do not appear to be universal, though. Civically engaged individuals should therefore not expect their activity to make them happier. Besides, the alleged benefits of engagement to the engaged should not feature as key incentives in volunteer recruitment messages. The actual purpose of civic engagement remains unchanged: voluntary contributions to the common good and to the democratic processes in the society. They have little to do with self-interest.

More information: Matthias Lühr et al, They are Doing Well, but is it by Doing Good? Pathways from Nonpolitical and Political Volunteering to Subjective Well-Being in Age Comparison, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2021). DOI: 10.1007/s10902-021-00480-4

Matthias Lühr et al, Nonpolitical versus political participation: Longitudinal associations with mental health and social well-being in different age groups. *Social Indicators Research* (2021). DOI: 10.1007/s11205-021-02777-6

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