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Human Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation: Turning Skills and Knowledge into Engagement and Action

by

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**Skills and Knowledge for Canada's Future: Seven Perspectives
Towards an Integrated Approach to Human Capital Development**

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Executive Summary

The paper examines the role of human capital in generating political participation and civic engagement. Defining human capital as the *set of skills and knowledge that can be drawn upon to produce outputs of value*, and adopting the concept as a lens through which to examine participation and engagement, reveals the costs and benefits associated with investments in human capital. It also frames the examination within the context of a *long-term* investment resulting in indirect societal benefits.

For conceptual clarity, political participation is defined as conventional and unconventional activities undertaken to influence political decision-making in the formal arena. Civic engagement, on the other hand, is defined as a larger set of activities that includes political participation, but extends beyond it to include activities in civic affairs such as involvement in community associations, as well as psychological dimensions of engagement such as media consumption and political interest.

A review of democratic theory reveals the key role understood to be played by education, instrumental in the development of human capital, in developing civic skills and a democratic ethos. The dominant theme in modern democratic theory is that significant levels of citizen participation are a necessary requirement for legitimacy, an argument that has led many to voice concern over the “democratic deficit.” Modern democratic theorists are not, however, united in arguing for significant levels of citizen participation.

One of the key findings of the paper is that examining civic engagement and political participation through a human capital lens makes clear the important modern role played by education in democracies. Investment in education provides the greatest returns in terms of political participation and citizen engagement, given its impact on cognitive and affective elements of participation. Cognitive skills include acquiring the knowledge required for understanding and accepting basic democratic principles, political structures and processes. Affective determinants of participation and engagement address the motivational element to participation; education increases one’s sense of civic duty but also results in higher levels of political efficacy and political interest, which increase the desire to participate. The returns are likely to generate not only greater levels of and more effective involvement in politics and civil society, but also greater representational gains, both in the articulation of interests and from elected representatives. Education quite simply produces more effective citizens.

For some groups, however, the translation of skills and knowledge gained through education into political participation and civic engagement is less efficient. Women, Aboriginal peoples, immigrant and visible minority groups, and the disabled face particular hurdles in the participation equation. Moreover, younger generations of Canadians are not participating at levels exhibited by earlier generations. Any project aimed at increasing the engagement of these groups must take into account their unique status within Canadian democracy.

Another key finding is the important role played by mobilization agencies in the private and voluntary sectors, both for the skills they engender among their members and their ability to

overcome representational deficits due to participation deficits among certain groups. This role can be particularly important for those citizens for whom education cannot be expected to provide a participatory boost; that is, for those who have dropped out of the formal education system prior to earning a high school diploma. Mobilizing agencies provide social networks that facilitate and, in some cases, encourage political participation; a set of skills that can be tapped for civic engagement; places that can encourage political discussion, and hence, political participation; direct links to parties and volunteer campaigns; and encouragement of and avenues for civic activity. As such, these organizations play an important role in linking citizens to the political system and civil society more broadly.

The paper argues that education provides the single most effective mechanism for reducing the barriers to civic engagement; policies designed to keep youth in school would yield significant personal and social benefits. Similarly, adult education programs should not be overlooked for their potential for increasing stocks of human capital in those for whom more traditional education has not, and is unlikely to, provide the skills and knowledge linked to enhanced civic engagement. Alternatively, voluntary organizations provide an important avenue for encouraging civic activity, and as such, policies ought to encourage their establishment and development. Finally, encouraging more deliberative models of citizen participation in the development of policy, such as that adopted in the BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, would increase citizen engagement, but, importantly, might reduce the cynicism directed at governments and politics more broadly.

Finally, the paper provides a number of suggestions for future research in the area. These include concentrating on the development of a causal model that seeks to clarify the multiple forces shaping civic engagement; a greater focus on the role of civics education for civic engagement and on the use of more deliberative models of policy development; increased research on the political participation and engagement of marginalized groups, women and the young to develop a better understanding of the multiplicative effects of barriers to engagement; and increased research on political participation at the provincial and municipal levels of government and on the political socialization of children.

Human Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation: Turning Skills and Knowledge into Engagement and Action¹

1. Introduction

Political science has recently had a renewed interest in the field of political behaviour, particularly as it relates to political participation. This renewed interest can be linked to two distinct sources. First, declining rates of voter turnout in a number of Western democracies over the past two decades have sparked an interest in understanding how and why citizens decide whether or not to participate in politics (for comparative data on voter turnout, see International IDEA, 2006). Concern for the perceived “democratic deficit”² that dropping voter turnout levels appear to indicate, or at least for its weaker cousin, a democratic malaise, has sparked increased interest in the field. Second, the publication of Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000), which argues that declining participation in social activities (hence the title) in the United States has led to a decline in social capital (consisting of social networks and norms of reciprocity), provides an intuitively pleasing and empirically testable model for examining the causes of participation decline that has since sparked a flurry of research on the topic. This paper fits squarely within this field of interest by examining political participation and the broader topic of civic engagement. At its core, it focuses on the question of what helps us to account for why some individuals are more likely to participate in politics than others, and in so doing, provides insight into possible policy responses for addressing declining rates of participation. Unlike much of existing literature, however, it approaches this question with one concept in particular in mind: human capital.

Investigating political participation and civic engagement through the lens of human capital is an approach distinct from much existing research on the topic. The dominant approach has been to examine the socio-demographic, institutional and psychological bases for political participation to better understand how and why citizens decide to exercise their civic muscle (Dalton, 1998). Research into declining voter turnout levels has concentrated specifically on investigating the various costs and benefits associated with voting, with the hope of better understanding such decisions at the individual level. Defining human capital as the *set of skills and knowledge that can be drawn upon to produce outputs of value* and adopting the concept as a lens through which to examine engagement, however, brings to the examination a consideration of both the costs and the benefits associated with action, but it also frames the examination within the context of a long-term investment. This notion of investment can be applied at both the individual and societal levels in an effort to better understand citizen engagement and the health of democracies.

The paper begins with a review of the human capital concept and its relatively limited use within the discipline of political science. Next, the concepts of civic engagement and political

¹ The author wishes to thank Mary Pat Mackinnon, Ron Saunders, an anonymous reviewer and a number of colleagues in the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Any remaining errors are my own.

² The term “democratic deficit” normally refers to the failure of modern democracies to approach the ideal of democracy, that is, in encouraging the informed, deliberative and effective participation of its citizens.

participation are introduced, summarized and contrasted to provide a stronger foundation for proceeding with an examination of each through the lens of human capital. Democratic theory is briefly reviewed to provide a foundation for addressing the assumptions made about citizens in democracies, and then the concept of social capital is introduced to elaborate on the linkages between social and human capital.

The paper then addresses the various sources of the skills and knowledge that have been linked to political participation and civic engagement, including social determinants such as socio-economic status and gender, and more psychological factors such as political interest and political knowledge. The paper then moves on to a critical examination of civic engagement and political participation as “outputs of value,” at both the societal and individual levels and closes with an examination of the policy implications of unequal access to human capital, and suggested directions for future research in this area. Throughout the paper the focus of the discussion is concentrated on research and theory on advanced industrial democracies.

One of the key findings of the paper is that examining civic engagement and political participation from a human capital lens makes clear the important role played by education in democracies; investment in education provides the greatest returns in terms of political participation and citizen engagement by increasing civic skills and political knowledge levels. The returns are likely to not only generate greater levels of and more effective involvement in politics and civil society but also greater representational gains both in the articulation of interests and from elected representatives. Another is the important role played by mobilization agencies in the private and voluntary sectors, both for the skills they engender among their members and their ability to overcome representational deficits due to participation deficits among certain groups; this role can be particularly important for those citizens for whom education cannot be expected to provide a participatory boost, that is, for those who have dropped out of the formal education system prior to earning a high school diploma.

2. Concepts and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Human Capital

The use of the term human capital is most closely associated with the work of American economist Gary S. Becker, beginning in the 1960s (Becker, 1964). Becker's insight was to apply an economic model to human behaviour. In it, individual agents are assumed to act in a rational manner and in accordance with a desire to maximize the potential for achieving some outcome. In the case of the human capital model, individuals are assumed to act in such a manner as to maximize their potential for income and/or wealth. More specifically, investments in education and training are seen as costs incurred at one point in time with the expectation of reaping returns on them, in the form of monetary benefits and wealth, at a later date. Paralleling models employed to better understand the decision-making of firms, it provides a distinctly different argument than those that had previously been adopted for understanding human behaviour, namely, identifying behaviour as a result of habit. Like investments in physical capital, investments in human capital are considered assets that will yield future earnings; unlike physical capital, these assets cannot be traded or sold in an open marketplace.

The model is applied at the individual level but, as will be discussed, provides important insight into not only the social factors that can be considered to influence individual investment decisions but also the manner in which these individual level decisions influence outcomes at the aggregate, or societal, level. Outputs of value for individuals may produce positive externalities at a higher level.

One of the earliest references to human capital of consequence for the political science literature was by James Coleman, a social theorist, who argued that it consisted of "changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways" (1988, s.100). For Coleman, an ability to explain human actions requires more than simply an investigation of the opportunities and resources available to them; instead, as a sociologist, Coleman argued for including the social context within which such decisions were made, in light of its impact on the decision's outcome. The social context, or as he referred to it, "the social capital," is a key element in the decision-making equation.³

As he points out, one indicator of human capital investment is high school education, and the level of education obtained by one's parents can be taken as an important indicator of whether or not an individual will consider education to be an important investment in one's future. Additionally, however, decisions regarding staying in school can rest squarely on the support provided by the family for the importance of education, quite apart from whether or not one's parents were able to achieve an above-average level of education. Subsequent research has expanded the concept of learning to include other forms of learning, and learning that occurs

³ Note that Coleman's definition of social capital differs significantly from that employed by Robert Putnam, discussed below. Coleman sees social capital as any aspect of a social structure that facilitates the actions of actors (persons or organizations) within that structure (1988). Putnam, on the other hand, defines social capital as consisting of the networks and norms of reciprocity that facilitate collaborative action (2000).

throughout the life cycle, rather than that which is more likely to occur early in life. Importantly, Coleman's insight has added value to the concept of human capital, and it has recently found renewed life in research on social capital.

The concept of human capital has also been employed within the political economy field of political science, particularly in relation to investments in human labour and the related impact on productivity. Investigations in this field of the discipline reveal that investments in human capital have a direct and positive influence on economic growth and provide a number of additional social benefits, including higher levels of health and lower levels of crime (OECD, 2001). Much of the research in the area has concentrated on understanding how political institutions and public policies influence the behaviour of markets, with investments in human capital being considered one of these behaviours.

One line of research that is particularly relevant to this discussion is the one that evaluates the impact of democracy on economic growth. According to Baum and Lake (2003: 336), "investments in human capital are influenced in important ways by the type of regime in power." Democracy has been shown to be positively related to levels of public health and education – two proxies of human capital (Lake and Baum, 2001). When using indicators for public health such as life expectancy and infant mortality, and for education such as adult literacy, empirical results reveal that the "causal arrow appears to run from democracy to public health and education rather than the reverse" (Baum and Lake, 2003:335). Democracies are much more likely to invest in public services, which can lead to direct and indirect effects on the level of human capital within a state. Importantly, the political system that relies on its citizens as participants in its decision-making processes appears to be most likely to invest in them. These investments, predominantly in the form of increased education and health services, provide citizens with the skills and knowledge necessary for political participation and engagement. Whether democracies invest adequately in their citizens, however, is a question worth asking and one that will be returned to below.

2.2 Civic Engagement and Political Participation

A review of the literature on political participation and civic engagement reveals the relative fluidity and overlap between the two concepts, and a rather high level of conceptual fuzziness in their application. Maintaining a conceptual distinction between the two concepts is particularly important for delineating the political from the larger civic sphere; although equally important, activities directed at the formal political arena are not the same as those directed at the civic community, either for the reasons that lie behind that involvement or for the expectations tied to that participation.

Civic engagement generally is taken to represent a larger set of activities and involvement that includes political participation but extends beyond it to include activities in civil society, which, according to Skocpol and Fiorina (1999: 2), is "the network of ties and groups through which people connect to one another and get drawn into community and political affairs." For Putnam, "civic engagement historically has come in many sizes and shapes," and his review of civic engagement in the US includes activity in politics and public affairs, involvement in community associations ("clubs and community associations, religious bodies, and work related

organizations, such as unions and professional societies” (2000: 27), and informal associations and activities (ranging from bowling leagues to picnics and parties). Additionally, engagement is often distinguished from participation in that it is not restricted to physical activity; instead, civic engagement is normally defined to include psychological engagement in civil society. Common measures of civic engagement include such indicators as political interest, media consumption and political knowledge, in that these provide a measure of the degree to which citizens are mentally participating in society. On the whole, civic engagement refers to the actions, beliefs and knowledge that link citizens to their societies and that establish the basis for cooperative behaviour.

Political participation, on the other hand, is normally restricted to conventional and unconventional activities specifically undertaken to influence political decision-making in the formal arena (Dalton, 1996, chaps. 2 and 3). Verba and Nie, for example, define political participation as “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (1972: 2). At its worst, political research sometimes employs voting alone as a proxy for political participation, thereby limiting a wide-ranging and multipronged concept to a single indicator. At its best, research taps into the multiple modes and objectives of political activity, including voting and elections, interest group and social movement activity, and protest behaviour. The recent broadening of the concept of political participation to include more civic modes of engagement, such as volunteering activities, has been criticized for having defined the concept in such an inclusive manner that the study of political participation has become in some ways “the study of everything” (van Deth, 2001). For example, Burns, Schlozman and Verba (2001), in their examination of gender and political participation, include a wide range of activities that includes but extends beyond voting and electoral activities to assess activities such as “involvement in organizations to take stands in politics, *informal efforts to address community problems; and voluntary service on local governing boards or regular attendance at meetings of such boards*” (55, italics added). This definition extends beyond influencing politics to include such activities as community action, an important investigation, without question, but one that clouds the distinction between civic and political activity.

Political participation should also be distinguished from the separate concept of political engagement. The latter concept encompasses the psychological as well as the physical dimensions of political activity and normally addresses such elements as political interest, political knowledge, political efficacy and political cynicism. The psychological dimension of political activity provides explanatory value with respect to political participation: the more interested and knowledgeable one is about politics, the more likely one is to participate (and vice versa). But the two concepts are not one and the same thing, and maintaining the conceptual distinction is essential.

2.3 Democracy and Human Capital

Any discussion of civic engagement and political participation ought to begin with a summary of democratic theory. The underlying assumption of much of the civic engagement literature is that democracy requires a particular level of participation by its citizens to be considered legitimate. Two questions stem from this premise: first, what assumptions does democratic theory make

regarding the skills and capacity of its citizens? And second, what level of participation is required for democratic legitimacy?

Modern political democracy rests in part on the notions of democracy established in Ancient Athens (Held, 1996). And these notions rest firmly on the assumptions made about citizens and their duties, skills and abilities. David Held (1996) provides a comprehensive review of the life of the citizen in Ancient Athens.⁴ For one, Athenian democracy was premised on an understanding that all citizens ought to participate in decision-making at the community level. According to Held, “Athenian democracy was marked by a general commitment to the principle of *civic virtue*: dedication to the republican city-state and the subordination of private life to public affairs and the common good” (17). Although it was understood that not all citizens would have equal ability, participation in public life was considered to provide a means of developing the skills and capacity necessary to achieve the goal of the common good. Moreover, it was assumed that citizens had the wisdom necessary to make decisions regarding the collective good, particularly when combined with freedom of speech, which allows for multiple viewpoints to be expressed on issues. The latter, it was assumed, would provide the information necessary to make wise decisions.

The point of citizen skills and knowledge in early democracies is also taken up by Paul Woodruff in his work *First Democracy* (2005). As he points out, the idea that all citizens, by virtue of being human beings, are equally capable of governing is perhaps democracy’s most controversial assumption (2005: 149). In Ancient Athens, this assumption rested in part on the understanding that while individuals are capable of developing expert knowledge on a limited range of topics, expertise in governance was not possible. As it was understood, governing requires an ability to foresee the future, something, it was believed, that no one but the Gods is capable of. Public decisions and governance, then, could call on the wisdom of experts for guidance but not for actual decisions. As Woodruff explains, “citizen wisdom is what the citizens in a well-run democracy ought to have. It builds on common human abilities to perceive, reason, and judge, but it requires also healthy traditions and good education for all” (154). The wisdom of citizens is crucial for governance, because it is capable of judging expert knowledge. In political matters, then, trust is to be placed in the capacities of ordinary citizens rather than those of experts, particularly given the fact that experts can take positions on issues dictated by self-interest. A further requirement for ensuring the ability of citizens’ wisdom to render good judgment is truth; citizens must have all the facts before them to bring their wisdom to bear on the decision to be made.

Education, according to Woodruff, plays an important role in the development of citizens’ wisdom. The role of education, in this context, is to allow the citizen to be open to new ideas and to develop tolerance. The source of citizens’ wisdom is quite simply common human wisdom improved by education. Not any education, however, but rather the type of education that makes for better human beings and for greater virtue. According to Woodruff, this particular form of education is one that teaches about community understanding of justice and reverence: *Paideia* (chap. 9). Investment in education, then, is seen to be essential for the development of an effective and skilled democratic citizenry.

⁴ An important point to remember is that citizenship in Ancient Greece was limited to a small subset of the population: free adult males of Athenian descent (Held, 1996: 15).

The benefits of education for democracy extend, one can argue, into modern representative democracies as well as into the more direct example of democracy in early Athens.⁵ As noted by one researcher, “it is reasonably clear that good citizens are made, not born” (Galston, 2001: 217). In representative democracies, education can provide the skills and knowledge that lower the costs associated with selecting among candidates in elections, with developing an understanding of political issues and debates, and with assessing the quality of governance. Moreover, it can assist in building the set of values upon which democracy rests, including, among others, tolerance. In short, it can improve the *effectiveness* of political participation (Milligan, Moretti and Oreopoulos, 2004).

The second question relates to the level of political participation required for democratic legitimacy. Two camps with contrasting arguments can be identified: those who support increased levels of public input into political decision-making, and those whose support for political participation is more guarded. This debate has a long and distinguished history in the discipline. John Stuart Mill, for example, argued that the best democracy is one in which as many citizens as possible voice their own interests; participation not only improves the political system, it improves its citizens as well. Schumpeter, on the other hand, argued for much more limited participation by citizens, restricted mainly to voting in general elections for the selection of political representatives and to ensure the accountability of elected officials.⁶

Benjamin Barber (1984) is a modern advocate of participatory politics, which he refers to as “strong politics,” where political engagement is an essential part of citizenship and community service is undertaken as an obligation of citizenship rather than merely for altruistic or charitable reasons. For Barber, an emphasis on rights and liberties has undermined the community requirements of democracy; a reinforcement of the balancing of rights with obligations would go some distance in addressing increasing rates of voter apathy and citizens.

More recently, a Standing Committee of the American Political Science Association tasked with examining “the problem of civic engagement” (vii) provided a number of arguments for why robust citizen engagement is essential for American (and presumably any Western) democracy (Macedo et al., 2005: 4-5). First, they argue, civic engagement enhances the quality of democratic governance by providing direct and incontestable evidence of citizens’ preferences to decision-makers. Second, democratic governance is only legitimate when the vast majority of citizens participate in self-rule; in line with J.S. Mill, governments are most likely to respond to the interests of those who mobilize, and thus, the greater the share of the population that mobilizes, the greater the number of interests that will be recognized. Third, citizens’ skills and knowledge are enhanced by direct participation and involvement in the political system: people learn by doing. And finally, a citizenry that is civically engaged can “provide a wide variety of goods and services that neither the state nor the market can replace,” leading to better lives and better communities (5).

⁵ The use of the term *more* is very deliberate in that a number of political institutions were filled by lot from among the citizens of Athens, and in this sense not all citizens participated in every aspect of public decision-making.

⁶ For a review of the classical debates on the appropriate level of citizen participation in representative democracies, see Held (1996).

The argument that high levels of civic engagement and participation necessarily enhance or are required to guarantee the success of democracy is not universally held. In their classic treatment of voting behaviour in the US, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) indicate that in spite of citizens' failure to meet the democratic theory's requirements for the successful operation of the system, it nevertheless appears to work. Successful democracies require a balance in the collective properties of the electorate: too much political interest, for example, can lead to extreme partisanship, which can impede compromise and consensus. Almond and Verba (1965) develop a similar argument in stating that the model of democracy calling for active, informed and involved citizens neither reflects the reality of successful democracies such as the United States and Great Britain nor understands the need to mitigate political activity; the ability of democratic governments to balance responsiveness and power instead requires "that the ordinary citizen be relatively passive, uninvolved, and deferential to elites" (343). The key is to balance political activity with passivity.

In spite of such evidence, the dominant view remains that political participation and civic education are to be encouraged, given the instrumental and expressive function performed by such acts. The benefits to democracy of an engaged citizenry, it is argued, outweigh whatever costs are associated with such participation.

2.4 Social Capital, Human Capital and Democracy

Much research attention has been devoted recently to social capital, in an attempt to explain declining levels of political participation.⁷ Social capital theory suggests that participation in voluntary associations develops social networks that lead to increased levels of trust and co-operation within communities (Putnam, 2000; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). Social capital, like human capital, can be thought of in terms of an investment, but in this case, an investment in networks and relationships rather than in learning and health.

At the individual level the payoff to these kinds of investments in social networks is trust in others, the development of norms of reciprocity and the career opportunities that can result from a well developed network of acquaintances. At a higher level, the benefits of social capital include an engaged and active citizenry that is better able to work together for mutual benefit, the very requirement of modern democracy. The social capital model in some respects parallels arguments made earlier by Almond and Verba regarding democracy's need for a "civic" culture (1963).

The most well-known articulation of the social capital model in relation to political science is that of Robert D. Putnam, who argues in *Bowling Alone* (2000) that declining levels of social capital are partly responsible for the decline in participation in the US. Participating in a weekly bowling club, as the theory argues, provides the foundation of trust, understanding and cooperation that can lead to successful democracies by providing the foundation for cooperative engagement. The theory has been challenged on a number of grounds (Adam and Rončević, 2003), including that it reflects a particularly American phenomenon, that the data simply do not

⁷ The argument that levels of political participation have declined has been contested; see Norris (2002) for an argument that rather than declining, political participation has experienced a shift in the activities in which citizens engage.

support the argument of decline, that the decline in traditional social capital has been offset by growth in new forms of participation, that the returns to social capital are not equal across groups, including across women and men (O'Neill and Gidengil, 2006), and that democracy can sustain the decline in traditional forms of participation so long as alternative mechanisms for voicing citizens' demands are in place (Stolle and Hooghe, 2004). Additionally, evidence suggests that the relationship between trust and political participation is a weak one at best, and that "the causal arrows are more likely to run from trust to civic engagement than from civic engagement to trust," an assumption made by Putnam and others (Uslaner and Brown, 2005: 890).

The relationship between social and human capital is important for understanding political participation and the broader topic of civic engagement. Human capital refers to the skills and knowledge that are core determinants of political participation. Education, as discussed below, can provide the cognitive skills and affective motivation for participation. Alternatively, these skills and motivation can be developed in the workplace or through volunteering. Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995), for example, identify the various skills and knowledge that are developed through volunteering activities that can lower the costs associated with political participation. What the social capital literature brings to the discussion is an appreciation of the importance for democracy of *relational capital*. While skills and knowledge may be necessary prerequisites for political participation and civic engagement, they may not be sufficient for ensuring that citizens are motivated to engage.⁸ The motivation to participate is likely to be higher where citizens have developed the bonds of trust and the norms of reciprocity that allow for cooperative action, and there is little reason to expect that these elements of social capital are distributed equally within society.⁹ Where human capital is embodied in individuals, social capital exists in relationships between them. Both, it can be argued, are central to investigations of political participation and civic engagement.

⁸ Robert Luskin has proposed a model to assist in understanding varying effects on political behaviour: factors influence each of the the ability, the motivation and/or the opportunity to participation politics. See Luskin (1990).

⁹ Uslaner and Brown (2005) provide evidence that levels of trust in the United States are strongly related to economic inequality.

3. Social Determinants of Human Capital and Engagement

A focus on human capital highlights the importance of understanding those factors that enhance one's likelihood of participating in the political process. Skills and knowledge, on the one hand, emphasize those cognitive elements that lie behind political participation. Yet affective elements are also important in the political participation calculus. Both are central to explanations of who participates in civil society and politics.

3.1 Socio-economic Status

Socio-economic status, or more specifically, the combined elements of formal education, income and occupational prestige, provides significant mileage in understanding both civic engagement and political participation (Dalton, 1998; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Gidengil et al., 2004). So well established is the link between socio-economic status and political participation that Verba and Nie refer to it as the "standard model" of political participation (as cited in Dalton, 1998: 54). Their link with civic volunteerism is also well established (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). Moreover, the effect of status is not limited to one generation, but rather, "high-SES parents pass on advantages to their children (both political behaviour that children learn from and indirect gains through children's educational attainment)" (Plutzer, 2002: 54).

Education arguably has the strongest impact on political participation of all socio-demographic variables (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Gidengil et al., 2004). As one element of socio-economic status, education has consistently been shown to translate into higher levels of political participation due to both the cognitive and affective changes that higher education can bring about. There is, for example, preliminary evidence to suggest that less emphasis on civics education over time may help to explain declining voter turnout rates among Canadian youth; further research, however, is required to establish this relationship more directly (Canadian Council on Learning 2006).

And although much research employs education as a determinant of participation without fully probing the causal linkages between the two, other research has provided insight into the nature of this relationship. Education provides the most basic cognitive skills that are required to navigate through political information and rhetoric. Both high school and post-secondary education have been found to have a positive impact on voting and, more broadly, on political engagement (Dee, 2004). For example, the development of language skills that accompanies higher education appears to be linked to political participation and voter turnout (Hillygus, 2005). Higher education, particularly a civic education, can provide the knowledge required for understanding and accepting basic democratic principles, political structures and processes (Nie and Hillygus, 2001). This knowledge, it is argued, can provide the necessary impetus for political action. A social science curriculum, in particular, has been found to generate the conditions that are likely to lead to increased participation in politics, although the effects are clear for any and all increases in educational attainment (Hillygus, 2005). Arguments have also been raised against limiting the discussion of learning to childhood, and in doing so emphasizing the importance of learning that occurs throughout life, particularly into adulthood (Côté, 2001: 30). Others highlight the importance of higher education for situating citizens within a network of other

political, informed and active citizens, and the role this can play in spurring political activity rather than the particular skills that education develops (Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry, 1996). And still others have highlighted the importance of legislative context for mediating the impact of education on political activity; differences in voter registration methods in the US and the UK translate into significantly higher returns to education in the former country (Milligan et al., 2004).

The better-educated are not only better equipped to engage, given their heightened ability to become and remain politically informed, but they are also more likely to have a desire to become politically informed. This increase in motivation, that is, the affective element of political participation, is likely to be heightened with higher education. This is partly due to the increased sense of civic responsibility and duty that is normally part of the curriculum in institutions of advanced education (Gidengil et al., 2004). Much of the recent drop in the voter turnout rate in Canada, for example, has been identified as stemming from decreases in those rates in one group in particular: young Canadians with less than a university education. According to Blais et al. (2002), the turnout in the 2000 election was almost 50 points higher among university graduates born after 1970 than among those in the same age cohort who had not completed high school.

Education's impact extends far beyond voting, however, and has an effect on civic engagement, political knowledge and interest, and political attitudes and opinions. Research has also suggested that education can lead to positive externalities in the form of not only greater likelihood of voting, attending political meetings and working on community issues, but also the quality of that involvement, at least in terms of voters having greater levels of political information that can be brought to bear on their political activities (Milligan et al., 2004). Education quite simply produces more effective citizens.

Linked to education, income provides citizens with the free time necessary to devote to political activities, as well as the resources that can be required for engagement (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995; Gidengil et al., 2004). One well-paying job, rather than several part-time jobs, for example, can make it that much easier to stay informed about politics. Similarly, having sufficient income to be able to afford child care can provide one with the peace of mind and time away from family responsibilities to devote oneself to civic-minded activities. And sufficient income is quite clearly required to donate to a political cause, party or campaign.

Occupation also plays a role in the development of skills that can increase the likelihood that citizens will engage in politics or civic engagement. Closely linked with income and education, one's occupation determines the types of duty that one undertakes. It also has direct consequences for the likelihood that one will engage in certain types of political and civic behaviour, in part due to the social networks that one's occupation can offer. Importantly, it is not the fact that one works that is relevant for political participation, but rather the type of occupation that one has. As noted by Verba et al., "teachers and lawyers are more likely to have opportunities to enhance civic skills – to organize meetings, make presentations, and the like – than are fast food workers or meat cutters" (1995: 315). Moreover, occupational status matters more for some types of activities than it does for others: contacting a public official requires a set of skills that differs from that required for casting a ballot.

3.2 Generation and Life-cycle

Modernization theories have argued that rising educational capacities, the growth of the service sector, and a rising standard of living have led to an increased capacity for and actual participation in political activities. The relationship between political participation and the skill sets of citizens varies across generations. According to Inglehart's postmaterialism thesis, the most recent generations in Western democracies place greater weight on nonmaterial interest and concerns than material ones; human rights and the environment, for example, take precedence over balancing budgets and fighting crime (1990). This shift to "higher-order needs," he argues, is due to a combination of increased prosperity and the relative absence of war, particularly when compared with the generations that experienced the Second World War. Loosely based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), generations for whom security – both economic and physical – has been taken for granted, are likely to place an increased priority on "self-actualization" needs.

Evidence for such a postmaterialist shift has been employed by those seeking to explain shifts in levels of political participation over time generations. With a Canadian focus, Neil Nevitte has examined how the shift in values across generations relates to changes in the type of political participation evident across several democratic states (1996). Nevitte points to declining levels of deference to political and other authorities, which stem from the increase in skills and capacity due to rising education levels. The combination of increased cognitive skills and an increased unwillingness to defer to the authority and experience of political experts has led, he argues, to a shift away from traditional political activities (voting) towards more unconventional protest behaviour (joining boycotts or attending demonstrations). These youngest generations have been referred to as "critical citizens" (Norris, 1999).

Quite apart, then, from the skills and knowledge embodied in citizens, external political events – or, as in this case, the lack of events (a major world war) – can lead to generational differences in the degree to which these skills and knowledge are translated into political participation. Stemming from Douglas Coupland's original discussion of Generation X (normally thought to encompass those born between the 1960s and 1970s), generational investigations into political attitudes and participation have revealed significant differences in political interest, knowledge, cynicism and participation (Milan, 2005; O'Neill, 2001; Stolle and Cruz, 2005). In Canada, the evidence consistently reveals that younger Canadians vote less often, are less likely to be members of political parties and interest groups, and pay less attention to and are less knowledgeable about politics.

The argument has been made that this turning away from traditional political activity corresponds to a turning toward more direct forms of participation in civic society. In support of this argument, evidence suggests that young people are more likely to volunteer than older people do, perhaps reflecting a shift away from indirect traditional mechanisms of political involvement toward more direct and outcome-driven forms of action. There are, however, those who have suggested that this argument is misplaced (Gidengil et al., 2003). Instead of seeing a turning away from traditional forms of political activity toward more involved and hands-on engagement, they see political and civic engagement as tending to be undertaken by the same individuals; that is, those who vote are also very likely to be those who volunteer at the local

food bank. And there is little evidence that any shift to more direct participatory activities is due to a shift in fundamental values. Among the youngest Canadians, it seems that their volunteering is occurring “in a more and more sporadic and episodic manner.” Much of the volunteering activity of youth appears to be tied to mandatory community programs in schools, as demonstrated by the drop in volunteering rates among working youth, and that it occurs for fewer hours on average than all volunteering (Stolle and Cruz, 2005: 89).

Related to generational explanations for changing patterns of political participation, life cycle explanations focus on differences in the salience and importance of politics during the various stages of life as explanations for variation in participation. If differences in participation rates and patterns are found across various age cohorts, they might not stem from the different generational forces working on each group but rather from differences in the salience of politics as a result of changing responsibilities and roles over the life cycle. Age has been found by some researchers to be as important as education in explaining political participation, and, importantly, may become relatively more important, for, as individuals age, “experience can compensate for low levels of education” (Plutzer, 2002: 42). Part of the story behind life cycle theories relates to aspects of life that differ at various times: family life, including marriage and children, for example, is likely to bring with it a set of responsibilities, concerns and interests that increase the probability of voting and a number of other forms of participation, including volunteering. Home ownership, in particular, which occurs at a particular point in the life cycle, has been shown to significantly affect the likelihood of participation (Verba and Nie, 1972). Importantly, however, a comparison of differences in participation rates across age groups in the current generation with those of previous generations suggests that generational effects are outpacing life-cycle ones. Participation rates among young citizens are so low, and the life cycle boost to participation so limited, that the gap will never be closed (O’Neill, 2001).

3.3 Gender

Gender is also an important determinant when considering human capital in the context of civic engagement and political participation. Gender differences in levels of educational attainment, income, and occupational status can be expected to translate directly into differences in levels and types of participation given the variation in the skills and motivation to participate they engender. And evidence suggests that this is indeed the case (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001). While the voting gap between women and men has closed in recent years, differences in participation in such activities as running for office and in political knowledge and interest remain (Erickson and O’Neill, 2002; Gidengil et al., 2006). On some measures, however, women’s participation outstrips that of men. Women, for example, are more likely than men to volunteer in spite of gender gaps in skills and knowledge (Hall, McKeown, and Roberts 2001); their greater religiosity, which has been shown to relate to their propensity to participate in politics, may account for such apparent contradictions (O’Neill, 2006). Women have also been linked to new forms of participation that more closely correspond with their position as primary purchasers in the household; namely political consumerism (Stolle and Micheletti, 2006). The latter, which some argue is a form of political participation, is defined as “consumer choice of producers and products based on political or ethical considerations, or both” and includes both boycotts and “buycotts” of products (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005: 246).

Quite apart from such differences, however, cultural differences regarding the appropriateness of politics for women versus men, which are likely to vary over time and across states, can also account for the weaker translation of these skills into political participation and engagement (O'Neill, 2002). Moreover, the degree to which women and men are able to translate social capital into political participation, for example, has been shown to vary and there is little reason to believe that the same would not be true for human capital (see O'Neill and Gidengil, 2006). The focus on gender makes clear that even if women and men do possess the same level of skills and knowledge, the ability of each to transfer these skills and knowledge into political participation and engagement varies in a number of respects.

3.4 Immigrants, Visible Minorities and Ethnic Groups

Given the relative importance of education, occupation and income for political participation, the barriers faced by visible minorities and immigrants in this regard are clear and this is in addition to the added barriers resulting from racism, discrimination, settlement and a general exclusion from the dominant culture. Research directed at better understanding the political participation and engagement of immigrants, ethnic groups and visible minorities within the field of political science, particularly in Canada, is extremely limited (for some exceptions see Abu-Laban, 2002; Black, 2001). Focused predominantly on voting, the research that has been conducted has found that immigration status can be generally more important for voter turnout than ethnicity, and that lower levels of turnout among immigrants are largely confined to those who are newly arrived (Black, 2001). Ethnicity nevertheless matters for participation in elections, for research has discovered variation in the turnout rates across a number of ethnic groups, which is linked in part to political activities in the countries from which they emigrated. Additionally, Gidengil et al. found that immigrants are as active in voluntary associations as other Canadians, except for those who have recently arrived (2004). Members of visible minorities, on the other hand, are less likely to be members of such associations, the exceptions being women's and environmental groups – where they are as active as other Canadians – and religious organizations and ethnic association where their participation exceeds the average.

Research has also identified the important role played by mobilizing agents for mobilizing members of these communities. A study of ethnic groups in Winnipeg, for example, has identified the importance of political mobilization among ethnic communities for the level of descriptive political representation that they enjoy (O'Neill and Wesley, forthcoming). Research on minority ethnic groups in Montreal provides similar findings for voting turnout, identifying the role played by the political culture in the community and, in particular, the normative significance attached to the voting (Lapp, 1999). American research reinforces this conclusion and notes that the existence of social capital within ethnic communities does not always translate into political engagement. Citing the example of ethnically based enclaves within major US urban centres, especially Asian-Americans, Latinos and Caribbean-Americans who exhibit low levels of political engagement, Fuchs, Minnite and Shapiro (n.d.) argue that only when social capital is explicitly political that is it likely to encourage citizens to become politically engaged.

3.5 Aboriginal Status

Similar to research on the political participation and civic engagement of visible minority and immigrant groups, the political participation and civic engagement of Aboriginal Canadians has not received a significant amount of attention. One recent investigation of traditional electoral politics reveals lower levels of voter turnout among Aboriginal peoples than among other Canadians, although there is considerable variation across communities (Gu erin, 2003). Major barriers to electoral participation for Aboriginal people – for example, the requirement of giving up status to participate in elections in place up until 1960 – explain part of the limited turnout levels. Socio-demographic factors are also at play, including the relatively young average age of the Aboriginal population, and their lower socio-economic status. Importantly, however, part of the explanation lies in the conscious disengagement of a number of Aboriginal Canadians from Canadian electoral politics, given questions of independent nationhood, colonialism and self-government (Guerin; Ladner, 2003).

Focusing exclusively on voter behaviour as an indicator of civic engagement is, however, an extremely faulty methodology. In the case of Aboriginal people in particular, low voter turnout belies a community that is especially politically aware, interested and engaged; discussions with young Aboriginal leaders identified an especially politically aware group who were particularly interested in their community and their band (Bishop and Preiner, 2005). There is evidence, for example, that electoral turnout for some band elections is significantly higher than that recorded general elections (Bedford and Pobihushchy, 1996). Others have noted that unique circumstances have required Aboriginal peoples to adopt avenues of “alternative civic engagement” such as seeking recognition and redress through the courts and taking direct responsibility for the delivery of certain services and programs (Whittles, 2005). Thus traditional definitions of concepts such as civic engagement and political participation may not “fit” for communities such as these, whose relationship to the traditional political system is unlike that of other communities.

3.6 Disability

Understanding political participation from within the context of skills and motivation highlights the unique position of the disabled for taking advantage of their civic rights. Disabilities are varied, and include physical and mental conditions. Unlike the vast majority of citizens, the disabled more often than not face unique barriers to political participation quite apart from their skills and motivation. These barriers are multiple; for voters they include physical barriers such as the absence of level access to polling stations, the absence of mobile polls or mail-in ballots for those unable to get to polling stations, and legislation that disallows electors to obtain assistance when marking their ballot. For candidates, the inability to include expenses related to one’s disabilities as legitimate personal expenses is prohibitive.

Although academic research into the unique position of the disabled vis à vis political and civic engagement is especially limited, what research there is has identified the many difficulties faced by the disabled in accessing elected office (D’Aubin and Steinstra, 2004) and voting (Prince, 2004). The link between political efficacy and political participation in particular has been examined for persons with disabilities. Political efficacy refers to an individual’s sense of their

ability to effect political change, either given their own skills and knowledge (internal efficacy) or the political system's likelihood of responding to citizens' demands (external efficacy). The research suggests that political efficacy is significantly less for people with disabilities than for those without disabilities, and that these differences can largely be explained by "disability" gaps in employment, income, education and participation in organizations (Schur, Shields and Schriener 2003). Moreover, the lower level of political efficacy explained about half the gap in political participation between people with and without disabilities. As such, policies designed to increase the educational and income opportunities for the disabled would have the additional effect of increasing their civic skills and sense of political efficacy, thereby indirectly increasing their levels of political participation. Employment in particular is likely to result to increased feelings of external efficacy, thereby additionally decreasing feelings of alienation and exclusion (2003: 141-42).

4. Linking Human Capital and Participation: The Psychological Sources of Engagement

Socio-demographic factors take us some distance toward understanding why people participate in politics and civil society. There are, however, a number of intermediary factors that mediate the relationship between socio-demographic factors and political participation more specifically, by providing in some cases the motivation and in others the ability to participate. As suggested by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995: 354), “interest, information, efficacy, and partisan intensity provide the desire, knowledge and self-assurance that impel people to be engaged by politics. But time, money, and skills provide the wherewithal without which engagement is meaningless.” Moreover, psychological engagement is partly explained by socio-demographic factors, thereby adding to the complexity of the picture.

4.1 Political Knowledge

One element in the human capital link to political participation is political knowledge or information. It is widely understood that political knowledge is positively related to political and civic engagement: those who know more about politics are more likely to participate politically (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). Political knowledge is a political resource that can be drawn upon to reduce the costs associated with political participation: factual knowledge about political parties, for example, provides one with the ability to assess the platform that converges on one’s own position on issues, allowing for more effective voting. Increased political knowledge and information has been found to lead individuals to make political judgements that are different from those they would make without the information (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). According to Milner (2002: 39), “Research at the individual level ... bears out the truism that knowledge is power, that the competent, active citizen is the knowledgeable citizen.” For Delli Carpini and Keeter, political knowledge is “the currency of citizenship” (as cited in Gidengil et al., 2004: 11). Some have argued that information shortfalls can be offset by a reliance on ‘shortcuts’ or heuristic cues (Popkin, 1991). Votes with little information, for example, can overcome their information shortfalls by looking to knowledgeable friends for advice, using party labels as clues to likely political agendas, or evaluating candidates and leaders on the basis of their personality traits or social backgrounds. Such arguments are not without their critics (for an overview, see Gidengil et al., 2004: chap. 4).

Advocates of enhanced civics education have argued that the decline in participation rates in Western democracies is linked to the reduced emphasis on civic education among children and young adults. Increased education levels over the past 50 years have not been matched by increased civic knowledge; rather the degree to which young citizens can answer questions on basic political facts has declined (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). According to this line of reasoning, a decline in political knowledge is partly to blame for the decline in participation. Additionally, Milner (2002) argues that levels of political knowledge, or civic literacy, help to account for variation in voter turnout levels at the aggregate level.

Canadian evidence suggests that Canadians are generally uninformed, rather than misinformed, about politics and that they do not live up to the “standards of traditional democratic theory”

(Fournier, 2002: 105). For example, Gidengil et al. (2004) while at various points in time between 70 and 90 percent of Canadians can identify their provincial premier, the numbers drop significantly when they are asked about specific party positions at the federal level. On the other hand, they argue that the level of political misinformation among Canadians is such that it results in a skewing of policy preferences; they suggest that “if Canadians were not misinformed, public opinion would be more favourable to spending for Aboriginal peoples and to rehabilitating young offenders, and there would be less willingness to cut welfare spending or to trade off jobs for environmental protection” (2004: 101). Importantly, they found that education appears to be the single most important factor in understanding varying levels of political information, although income, age and gender also add some explanatory impact. The importance of this relationship has been underscored in research conducted on the US and UK (Milligan, Moretti, and Oreopoulos 2004).

4.2 Political Efficacy

As noted above, political efficacy is normally defined as the sense one’s sense of one’s ability or capacity to affect political outcomes. The stronger one’s sense of personal efficacy, the more likely one is to participate in politics. Two independent measures of political efficacy can be identified: internal efficacy and external efficacy. The former can be understood as a sense of one’s own ability to understand and participate in politics, while the latter refer to a sense of one’s ability to effect political outcomes through one’s actions (Abramson, 1983: chap. 8). Both are clearly linked to skills and knowledge; that is the greater the number of skills that one believes one possesses, the more likely it is that one will participate in politics. Moreover, the more one participates in politics, the stronger that one’s sense of political efficacy is likely to be. That efficacy is a strong predictor of political participation and engagement has been confirmed in much of the literature on the subject (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995).

Research reveals that Canadians demonstrate very low levels of political efficacy. A survey collected in 2000 revealed that 63 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “people like me don’t have much say over what government does” and that 49 percent agreed with the statement “The major issues of the day are too complicated for most voters” (Howe and Northrup, 2000: 9). Such affective predispositions play a role in determining levels of engagement that is quite independent of that played by levels of general skills and knowledge more.

4.3 Political Interest

Interest in politics provides the motivation required to devote significant time and energy to follow politics. Political interest can be important for political participation in that it provides the motivation for acquiring political information that can assist in assessing political alternatives and governmental action. It can be argued that political interest has become more important for citizens’ willingness to become politically informed, for although increased media communication has provided easier access to political information, it has also meant that political media content is easier to ignore (Gidengil et al., 2004).

The concept of political interest has been operationalized in a number of ways and found to be positively linked to political activity in a number of studies (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995: 345-46). Gidengil et al. find that levels of political interest in Canada vary with age (for life-cycle rather than generational reasons), income, education and gender (2004). The positive impact of education on political interest has also been recorded in the US and the UK (Milligan Moretti and Orwopoulos 2004).

4.4 Political Cynicism

Like the concept of political interest, political cynicism has been operationalized in a number of ways and has been used interchangeably with such concepts such as alienation, and dissatisfaction. Generally, the concept refers to attitudes regarding the level of trust that one has in the competence and ethical standards of politicians and in the political system more generally, and it has been identified as a determinant of political participation. Increasing political cynicism has been linked to falling rates of voter turnout in popular commentary in the US and Canada, but strong evidence to support this link has yet to be found (Gidlengil et al., 2003; Norris, 2002; O'Neill, 2001). Political cynicism is generally assumed to depress political participation; those who have little faith in politicians and the political system are less willing to engage with them. But the opposite relationship can also exist, in that a lack of trust in the system can provide a stimulus for mobilizing in an attempt to “fix” the system or at least increase accountability (Norris, 2002: 98). Survey research conducted in Canada in 2000 revealed that 44 percent of Canadians disagreed with the statement “Given the demands made on the federal government, they generally do a good job getting things done.” (Howe and Northrup, 2000: 10).

5. Mobilizing Agencies and Engagement

Research on political participation and civic engagement has identified the important role played by mobilizing agencies, such as trade unions and religious organizations, in drawing citizens into action. Several theoretical explanations have been identified for the impact of such organizations on political activity (see Norris, 2002: chap. 9). For one, membership in an organization provides citizens with the social networks that build feelings of trust and reciprocity (that is, the social capital) and facilitate participation, particularly for those with limited cognitive and other resources. Membership also provides the possibility for learning a set of skills that can be tapped in various ways. Women's volunteering, for example, has been shown to provide them with a set of skills that are useful for various political activities (O'Neill, 2006). Organizations are also likely to increase political participation by involving members in political discussion and, moreover, by encouraging and even mobilizing such action for their members. Finally, mobilizing agencies can provide a direct link to political parties, and also encourage their members to volunteer and donate to various campaigns. As such, these organizations play an important role in linking citizens to the political system in democracies.

For example, Fuchs, Minnite and Shapiro argue that local party associations play an important role in mobilizing citizen involvement in politics in urban centres in the United States (1999). Norris's research suggests that membership in unions and religious organizations is positively associated not only with voter turnout, but with a wide range of political activities, including party membership and protest activity (2002). Moreover, she finds that their effect can help marginalized groups overcome a number of barriers to participation they encounter. Thus mobilizing agencies both directly and indirectly affect human capital, and in so doing, determine engagement levels.

6. Civic Engagement and Political Participation as Outputs of Value

Before proceeding to a discussion of the policy implications of the role of human capital in encouraging political participation and civic engagement, a brief discussion of the investment and payoff elements of the concept is in order. The human capital model presumes that investments are made as a result of rational self-interest: investing in one's education now is likely to lead to the payoff of higher income and wealth at some point in the future.

How does the application of the concept to political participation and civic engagement assist in our understanding of them? Is it reasonable to presume that individuals will invest in their own human capital to improve their political and civic skills? Are political participation and civic engagement outputs of value? The question of whether voting and political participation are rational acts was first taken up by Anthony Downs (1957). Turnout, he argued, if viewed through the lens of rational choice theory, was an irrational act. The cost to voting could not be offset by the benefits, given the unlikely impact of any one vote on the election outcome. Cost-benefit calculations regarding voting, and also broader forms of political participation, should result in decisions to abstain. But such calculations do not adequately capture the participatory calculus, given that so many people in Western democracies do participate, in spite of the limited payoff. Clearly, there are additional forces at play. Blais (2000) has argued that the part of the story behind voter turnout not captured by rational choice theory is duty. Many citizens vote quite simply because they believe it is their duty to do so as citizens. Importantly, this normative imperative has been linked to education: education provides not only the cognitive but also the affective skills for active citizenship.

Beyond voting, increased skills and knowledge reduce the transaction costs associated with engagement, but the benefits to this increased engagement are neither straightforward nor guaranteed. One potential benefit includes increasing the likelihood that one's interests and values are more effectively articulated. Governments are more likely to respond to effectively articulated interests. One could consider variation in response to interest to be due to differentials in human capital investment: responsiveness to interests might be thought of as a premium that represents the going rate of return on past investment in human capital. Citizens who invest more in their human capital "earn" the premium of government responsiveness. But this counters the most fundamental assumptions of democratic theory: the equality of citizens. Representative democracy ought to aspire to the effective articulation of all interests, not only those of the most skilled and knowledgeable. Moreover, it is not enough to examine the decisions made by individuals—rather, the overall level of well-being also depends on "societal preferences and values with regard to equality of opportunities, civil liberties, distribution of resources and opportunities for further learning" (Côté, 2001: 30).

At the aggregate level, government investment in human capital reaps clear social benefits: increased skills and knowledge lead to increased levels of participation and engagement, which are integral for the success of modern democracies. In line with the human capital model, increasing the skills and knowledge of citizens produces *general* human capital, which is useful

for all but in which few are willing to invest, given the diffuse nature of the benefits it produces.¹⁰

Governments must be kept accountable, and only those governments that believe citizens are paying attention and are willing to guarantee government accountability will respond accordingly. Additionally, investment in skills and knowledge can lead to indirect learning through political engagement; participation in politics can lead to “enlarged interests, a wide human sympathy, a sense of active responsibility for oneself, the skills needed to work with others toward goods that can only be obtained and created through collective action, and the powers of sympathetic understanding needed to build bridges of persuasive words to those with whom one must act” (Galston, 2004). *À la* Tocqueville, investing in human capital can help to reduce class differences by bringing together people of various social classes to engage directly in political causes, or by assisting in the development of habits of cooperative behaviour that allow for the development of functional democracies. Thus, human capital can produce the social capital that assists in producing the skills, values, knowledge and action that are beneficial for public life.

¹⁰ General human capital can be contrasted to specific human capital, which provides skills and knowledge specific to a particular occupation and for which the benefits are more selective.

7. Policy Implications and Future Research Directions

7.1 Policy Implications

Existing research on political participation and civic engagement reveals that no single factor can explain a significant proportion of the variation in these elements of democratic citizenship. Although socio-demographic factors provide significant explanatory power, it is necessary to account for affective factors such as political interest and political efficacy in order to develop a more complete model of these civic activities. Additionally, a one-size-fits-all model is problematic in that it can fail to capture adequately the unique political contexts within which certain groups, such as Aboriginal peoples, the disabled and women, function. Having said this, existing policy has an impact on citizen engagement, and future policy commitments could provide a potential avenue for addressing the current democratic deficit.

A more even distribution of human capital in democracies would go some distance toward reducing the barriers that currently restrict civic engagement, and the single most effective mechanism for achieving this end is education. The skills and knowledge that result from education, particularly at the secondary and post-secondary levels, are those that directly assist citizens in managing the complexity of politics and instill the confidence that brings with it a willingness to engage. Moreover, education has been found to develop a sense of civic duty that can encourage such “irrational” acts as voting. Policies that discourage high school students from dropping out¹¹ or help to manage the high costs associated with obtaining a post-secondary education bring with them the additional benefit of creating more effective citizens. Encouraging youth to remain in high school has been singled out for the positive impact it would have on declining voter turnout rates (Gidengil et al., 2004; Stolle and Cruz, 2005). And perhaps counter to conventional wisdom, public and private schools have been found to be equally likely to assist in the development of civic skills (Galston, 2001). A successful effort to keep youth in school would yield additional rewards in the form of increased income and higher status occupations, both of which are associated with higher levels of engagement.

While education alone can provide a civic boost, recent research suggests that specific curricula, such as civics education and service learning, are worthy of serious attention (Galston, 2001). While it is clear that not all programs are equally successful and that different types of programs encourage different kinds of engagement, organized education is the most efficient and effective means of reaching a significant share of the population at a time when it can yield the greatest results.

While there is agreement on the importance of education for democracy, there is likely to be harder to achieve over the particular curricula that ought to be adopted, because of the lack of agreement on what modern representative democracy ought to expect of its citizens and what makes for “good” citizens. According to Westheimer and Kahne,

¹¹ The Ontario government recently introduced a bill that would deny a driver’s license to and impose fines on those who drop out of school before the age of 18, in an effort to reduce the dropout rate in the province (see Alphonso, 2005).

For some, a commitment to democracy is a promise to protect liberal notions of freedom, while for others democracy is primarily about equality or equality of opportunity. For some, civil society is the key, while for others free markets are the great hope for a democratic society. For some, good citizens in a democracy volunteer, while for others they take active parts in political processes by voting, protesting, and working on political campaigns. (2004: 2)

In spite of this disagreement, there has been a tremendous growth over the past 20 years in the share of US high schools offering community-service opportunities (often referred to as service learning requirements), up to 83 percent according to recent figures produced by the National Center for Education Statistics (2004: 2). These programs are no doubt responses to the perceived “crisis” in youth engagement, but they nonetheless suggest the central role that education is perceived to play in democracies.

These programs have, however, varying objectives and goals, a variance stemming directly from the very different ways of understanding of the role of citizens in modern democracies and from the very different conceptions of democracy that are embraced.¹² In their recent review of such programs in the US, Westheimer and Kahne developed a framework of three distinct visions of citizenship embodied in the programs: the *personally responsible citizen* (who acts in a responsible manner in his/her community), the *participatory citizen* (who is an active and often organizing participant in community efforts) and the *justice-oriented citizen* (who understands systemic sources of injustice and seeks to change the system accordingly). The framework makes clear the contrasts in the assumptions made in the development of the programs and the resulting conflict in the definitions of ‘the good citizen’ across the various programs. And importantly, the three frameworks do not develop the requirements of citizen participation in the same manner (Westheimer and Kahne, 6; Galston, 2001).

The focus on learning in high-schools and university ought not to blind policy-makers to the important role that education can play in developing human capital in other forums. Importantly, adult education classes and back-to-work ought also to be considered essential and alternative avenues for developing the cognitive skills that are so clearly linked to engagement. And as Henry Milner argued, the example of state funding of adult education programs such as those found in Sweden suggests the potential impact of focusing on adult literacy for civic literacy and engagement (Milner, 2002). Added benefits from such programs include the generational transmission of education’s value to the children of adults in such programs, which has important implications for whether children decide to stay in school.

Governments should also consider how their policies encourage and discourage the establishment and development of voluntary associations, and in particular the long-term investment value of committing public resources to such organizations to assist them in their functions. In their role as mobilizing agencies, these organizations provide an important avenue for developing and employing skills and knowledge to a civic end. Such organizations as trade unions, religious organizations, political parties and social movements encourage the activity and engagement that develops a set of skills, a body of knowledge and the psychological dispositions

¹² See Held (1996) for a review of the various models of democracy and its components.

that are essential for both effective citizenship and for a successful democracy. These organizations are an essential component of civil society, and

[i]n the absence of civil society, the state often needs to step in to organise individuals who are incapable of organising themselves. The result of excessive individualism is therefore not freedom, but rather the tyranny of what Tocqueville saw as a large and benevolent state that hovered over society and, like a father, saw to all its needs. (Fukuyama, 2001: 11)

The importance of such groups is underscored when one considers that they are an important avenue for providing the political skills and knowledge that can encourage engagement to those young Canadians who drop out of school at an early age and are unlikely to return to earn their diplomas.¹³

Policies designed to minimize engagement barriers to particular groups ought also to be encouraged. Canada's chief electoral officer has commissioned significant research on the causes of declining levels of voter turnout among youth, and he has involved them in a number of forums addressing this question. He has followed up on this research with a set of policy changes designed to remove the barriers that are particularly restrictive for this group.¹⁴ The permanent voters' list and the Internet and e-mail have each been the focus of these efforts. And while it remains too early to determine whether these efforts will pay off, they provide a clear model of how to formulate public policy: conduct research on the question at hand, involve the voices of the community itself in the discussion, and allow both to inform the prescriptions for change. Such efforts ought to be extended, and similar efforts encouraged among groups facing substantial barriers to participation, such as recent immigrants, the disabled and Aboriginal people.

Finally, investments in human capital will only reap benefits if citizens believe their engagement is likely to be worthwhile. Modern democracies must address the current political malaise that views politics as unimportant, or worse, as corrupt. While some have advocated electoral system reform in Canada as a potential way to deal with high levels of political cynicism (Milner, 1999), the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform established an important precedent in participatory or deliberative democracy. A group of randomly selected citizens from across the province participated in the year-long exercise, which directed them to examine the existing electoral system and consider the possibility of reform. While its recommendation for reform (the Assembly recommended a shift to a modified single transferable vote electoral system) was narrowly defeated in a province-wide referendum,¹⁵ the exercise itself successfully

¹³ Although the drop out rate is declining over time, it remains high among Canadians between the ages of 20 and 24. According to Statistics Canada, 9.8 percent this age group (or 212,000 Canadians) was not in school and did not possess a high school diploma during the 2004/2005 academic year (importantly, the figure was 12.2 percent for young men and only 7.2 percent for young women) (see Statistics Canada, 2005).

¹⁴ The commissioned research and the various policy and program changes can be found at www.elections.ca.

¹⁵ To pass, at least 60 percent of valid votes had to be in favour of the referendum and majority support had to be achieved in 60 percent of electoral districts (48 of 79). Although the vote in the referendum met the latter requirement, it failed to meet the first by 2.3 percentage points (see www.elections.bc.ca/elections/ge2005/finalrefresults.htm). Such "special majorities" are often adopted

demonstrated the capacity and willingness of ordinary citizens to engage in collaborative decision-making.¹⁶ Additionally, it provided a concrete example of a government trusting the capacity of its citizens to render recommendations and a decision, something that ought to be encouraged for the potential it has for reducing levels of political cynicism, overall trust and apathy.

As such, investigation into the possibility of employing more deliberative instruments of public policy-making ought to be encouraged, in that reasoned and responsible deliberation of policy by citizens is associated with increased political knowledge and interest, both of which increase the probability of increased engagement and participation. Thus, quite apart from any policy benefits that might accrue from deliberative forms of policy making, the gains to be had in terms of increased human capital, and hence engagement, are difficult to overestimate.

7.2 Future Research Directions

A review of the research on the development of civic and political skills and knowledge and their impact on political participation and civic engagement reveals the overwhelming complexity of these relationships. This complexity is assisted by a tendency for research to address narrow slices of the causal model “pie”; our knowledge of a particular population or form of activity, for example, might be expanded, but this often comes at the expense of understanding how these relationships parallel those in other populations or among other forms of activity. Future research ought in the first instance to avoid the tendency to narrow the investigative focus and instead attempt to develop a more comprehensive picture of engagement. Similarly, research would be advanced with a commitment to improve conceptual clarity in the field; it ought to be guided by a set of clear and well-understood concepts to allow for knowledge development.

Second, research in political science ought to continue to investigate the role that civics education and service learning plays in the development of participatory and civics skills and action. Linkages with researchers in education ought to be encouraged for the obvious synergies that would result. The evidence that has been gathered recently on this question has advanced our understanding of the role such learning plays, but it is still rather preliminary. Recent research identifies the benefits of civics education for increasing knowledge of democratic practices and beliefs and for increasing political interest efficacy, but it also identifies the variation in effect depending on when the learning occurs (Galston, 2001). Findings in the US suggest that service learning must “be organized in relation to an academic course or curriculum, must have clear learning objectives, and must address real community needs over a sustained period of time” (229). Similar research ought to be encouraged in Canada, particularly longitudinal investigations, to assist in understanding how learning in the childhood and early adult years,

in cases of fundamental policy or constitutional change to ensure that such changes are adopted with the consent of a significant portion of the population and to discourage indiscriminate and frequent tinkering.

¹⁶ In a symposium at the 2005 Canadian Political Science Association Meetings, one of the members of the Assembly noted that in spite of the ultimate defeat of the recommendation, she had no regrets for having participated in the process. In spite of the frustration that accompanied trying to bring such a large group to consensus on their recommendation, she noted that the experience increased both her knowledge of political issues and the skills she possessed, and moreover, left her with a renewed appreciation for the importance of citizenship, engagement and democracy.

within various contexts and with varying curricula, affects participation and engagement throughout life (Galston, 2001; Gidengil et al., 2004).

Third, the BC Citizens's Assembly on Electoral Reform provides an important example of the use of deliberative democracy in the formation of public policy. Although there exists a long history of normative treatments addressing the adoption of such mechanisms in established democracies, there is less to be found that reviews the application of such mechanisms in recent years, particularly in Canada. Cases such as the BC example ought to be examined not only for their viability as policy formation mechanisms, but importantly for their indirect consequences for political interest, knowledge, efficacy, participation and civic engagement more broadly. If nothing else, as educative mechanisms, such instruments may provide an opportunity for overcoming existing human capital deficits and some elements of Canada's current democratic malaise.

Fourth, the political participation and engagement of marginalized groups, and to a lesser extent of women, is a topic that receives far too little attention in the discipline. This lack of attention means that we understand too little about the multiplicative effects of the barriers (poverty and disability, for example) and too little about the unique barriers that such groups face (our inability to explain away gender gaps in participation, for example). The examination of the political and civic engagement of Aboriginal peoples, in particular, calls attention to the manner in which conventional conceptual definitions can marginalize communities. Although a number of these groups make up a small proportion of the population, thus making it hard to capture them with large scale survey methodology, the important role that such an understanding could play in helping to break down existing barriers ought to provide sufficient motivation for adopting alternative methodologies suitable for such investigations.

Fifth, the political behaviour and engagement of young Canadians demands further research. Contradictory claims regarding whether young people have adopted alternative forms of participation, and unanswered questions regarding education's changing impact on participation among younger generations and lower levels of political knowledge in the face of rising educational levels, require that additional research effort be directed at this group of Canadians. To the extent that this group might be redefining modes of political activity, research ought to be focused on it to evaluate the consequences of these shifts and their implications for Canadian political institutions such as political parties and processes such as elections.

Sixth, too little of the research into political participation and citizen engagement in Canada examines the provincial and municipals levels, reflecting in part the relative dearth of individual level data at the subnational level. Evidence of variation in voter turnout across levels of government (see Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2001) provides important evidence that similar forms of participation (for instance, voting) do not invoke similar participation calculi. There is little reason to believe that other forms of engagement and participation might not reveal similar differences, and as such the research focus ought to extend to other levels of government.

Finally, political research into the processes and agents of political socialization, of children in particular, ought to be revived. As noted by Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995: 513), social

structures shape participation, and these structures are firmly rooted in family, schools, jobs, churches and voluntary associations. While research on the latter two has increased in recent years with the renewed interest in social capital research, our knowledge of political participation and engagement could be significantly advanced by increased research on the social and private forces behind public activity.

8. Conclusion

A line of democratic theory asserts that citizens possess a certain wisdom, which, when refined by education, provides them with the ability to effectively engage in governance. Modern research suggests that education plays just such a role: it creates more capable, more interested, and more effective citizens. Investment in human capital reaps significant returns in the form of enhanced cognitive skills and in increased affective engagement. If citizens are made rather than born, then education ‘makes’ citizens. What people know and what they can do explains a significant portion of the variation in engagement levels in democracies. However, motivation to participate is also an important part of the picture – acquired skills and knowledge are more likely to be employed in civic pursuits in combination with a desire to do so. This desire can stem from either self-interest, a sense of duty, family, a social network, and/or a political culture that encourages political participation and engagement but it does not develop in a vacuum. Thus, human capital and social capital together take us much further in our understanding of civic engagement than human capital alone.

Individual investments in human capital are important, but they take place within a social and institutional context that limits the individual benefits that derive from civic engagement. As such, government’s role in human capital investment is most important. Government plays a central role in determining required levels of education and curricula and in shaping labour market and social welfare policies; each influences the skills and knowledge levels that encourage active engagement in civil society. Direct investments in human capital alone, however, are unlikely to reduce the democratic deficit. Instead, research identifies the complex interaction of skills, knowledge and affective motivation, and the various mechanisms and structures that define the context within which they develop. Governments, for example, play a role in shaping the framework within which mobilizing agencies develop, and thereby indirectly shape the levels of engagement in society through their membership. Governments also have to assume leadership roles in developing and implementing policy instruments that will assist in reducing the additional and multiple barriers faced by certain communities. Finally, the actions of government can determine the skills and knowledge of citizens through their willingness to engage them directly in policy formulation (for example, the BC Citizens’ Assembly) and in political decision-making (for example, binding referendums). Engaging the tools of participatory democracy increases not only citizens’ skills and knowledge (that is, in learning by doing) but also citizens’ trust in government and it additionally provides an outlet for more “cognitively mobilized” citizens. A commitment by government to address the “democratic deficit” should begin by questioning whether its investment levels in human capital are sufficient for reaping expected levels of return.

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