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A Developmental Science of Politics: How Research with Adolescents has Expanded the Meaning of Politics

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Scholarship on civic/political engagement as a domain of adolescent development has surged over the past few decades. However, as [Patterson et al. \(2019\)](#) point out in their monograph, *Toward a Developmental Science of Politics*, there has been relatively less attention to political development in children. Nonetheless, insofar as the research on adolescents is firmly grounded both in political theory and in theories of human development, it offers rich fodder for studies of civic/political development during childhood. I summarize major insights from the extant body of work and emphasize how a human-development lens expands the imagination about what politics means and how people engage in it.

First, in contrast to political socialization models which emphasized the intergenerational transmission of political loyalties and the pre-adult years as preparation for voting in adulthood, the new scholarship focuses on the civic agency of youth and their unique political insights and contributions *as young people*. In this framework, politics is not narrowly defined as the business of government nor is the role of citizens reduced to voting every few years. In fact, many concerns that mobilize youth into political activism (school to prison pipeline; police in schools; gun violence; climate change) are political issues that have not garnered the attention of many elected officials.

Second, although categorizing behaviors as either *civic* or *political* is a convenient way to distinguish community from electoral participation, there is a seamless connection between these forms of engagement: Involvement in public performance, community service, and political action in adolescence predicts voting, volunteering, and civic leadership in adulthood, whereas involvement in other extracurricular activities does not (McFarland & Thomas, 2006).

Why? In contrast to many interest-based activities where the membership is somewhat homogeneous, there are unique developmental affordances of civic engagement. In part this is due to the fact that it takes place in what the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958) called the "public realm" where everyone, regardless of their status, beliefs, or background can come together. In that realm, many youth are exposed to issues (hunger, housing, literacy, environmental pollution, etc.) and to people affected by those issues whom they might not encounter in their private lives. Thus, there is potential in this realm for their understanding of the community and their sense of responsibility for its needs to expand. In addition, because

civic engagement is collective action typically done through community-based organizations (CBOs) youth can see how they are helping to realize the civic goals of a larger group. Making such connections is a basis for forming a civic identity (Hart & Youniss, 2018).

A third insight from contemporary scholarship on youth civic engagement is that attention to political issues is generated by an awareness that political issues are controversial and that it matters to take a stand, by discussion and exchange of different perspectives, and by collective action. Teachers' role in creating a civil climate for learning is key: Both racial/ethnic minority and white students are more likely to believe that America is a fair society and to personally commit to a range of civic behaviors if they feel that their teachers create a democratic climate for learning, that is, applying the same fair standards to all students, encouraging students to take positions on issues, and insisting on tolerance of and respect for diverse perspectives (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007). The term, *action civics*, captures the current wisdom that teaching focused on representative government alone fails to motivate students' interest. Rather, core principles of democracy are learned, and individuals become more engaged citizens when politics is made relevant through participation in discussions of current events and actions where students can make a difference (Gingold, 2013).

For my fourth point I draw from the elements that the political theorist, Michael Walzer (1989), includes in his definition of a citizen, that is, a *member of a political community* entitled to whatever *prerogatives* and encumbered with whatever *obligations* are attached to membership. His focus on membership, prerogatives, and obligations provides a basis for studying political formation processes in developmental settings. With this in mind I have used the term, *mini-polities* to refer to schools, faith-based organizations, team sports, community organizing and service projects – spaces where youth and adults cocreate what it means to be a member of a community, with shared rights and responsibilities. It is in the relationships and identities constructed in these mini-polities – the collective voice they exercise in an activist project, the authority shared with adults in a democratic classroom, the feeling of belonging to and responsibility for a team – that they identify themselves as members of a political community with rights in and responsibilities to that larger whole.

Fifth, opportunities for civic practice and the rules of the *social contract* that bind members of a polity together vary for different groups of young people. For example, there are structural inequities between schools in opportunities for developing basic literacy and numeracy skills as well as in affordances for civic practice through discussions, debates, leadership, and community service programs (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). In addition, group differences in youths' political beliefs and commitments will reflect how the terms of the social contract play out for people "like them". For example, when African-American parents have 'the talk' with their children, they are communicating political messages about how the authority of the state, through the actions of police, can be wielded against them. In short, children's political views will be shaped by the opportunities they have for civic practice and by the groups (racial/ethnic, gender, immigrant, sexual orientation) with whom they identify.

My final point concerns the role of values in the political formation of youth. As a political scientist, David Easton (1965) defined politics as "the authoritative allocation of values" to emphasize that laws and policies result from groups negotiating over the values that are desirable for their polity. In the context of human development, values reflect the principles a

person believes in and the standards that guide her decisions and behaviors. As Erikson argued, fidelity to personal values is the cornerstone of adolescent identity formation. I end this commentary with a claim that studies of values should play a prominent role in theories of children's political development. In my own work, I have found that the degree to which adolescents endorse self-transcending over self-enhancing values is positively correlated with their support for environmental and social welfare programs, with their tolerance and trust of fellow humans, and with their beliefs that immigrants enrich rather than threaten America (Flanagan, 2013). In sum, just as values reflect beliefs about a just life, they also inform our ideas about what constitutes a just society.

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