Training Young Activists: Grassroots Organizing and Youths' Civic and Political Trajectories

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Abstract

This article examines how nonprofit activist youth groups shape the civic and political trajectories of their adolescent members. Based on analyses of survey and semi-structured interview data gathered from low-income, racially diverse, and immigrant alumni members of grassroots youth organizing groups and from a comparison sample, findings suggest that adolescent activist groups foster high levels of civic and political participation in early adulthood. Similar to other public-oriented volunteer associations—such as student government—activist groups impart civic skills and experiences that facilitate later involvement. Yet activist groups may function as particularly intensive training grounds for future participation by developing members' political consciousness and engaging them in political processes. In spite of operating within a neoliberal context that sometimes inhibits the political activity of nonprofits, contemporary grassroots youth organizing groups, somewhat like the 1960s' civil rights groups decades earlier, can propel some young people toward ongoing engagement with social movements.

Keywords

civic engagement, youth, social movements, political participation, nonprofits

Since the late 1980s, youth organizing (YO) groups have engaged high-school-age adolescents in grassroots campaigns to address social justice issues affecting their communities. Often relying on foundation funding, these nonprofit groups typically recruit urban youth from low-income, racially diverse, and immigrant backgrounds and engage them in collective efforts to change school, municipal, state, or federal policies and programs. Given young people's intensive involvement in campaigns, commentators have argued that these organizations profoundly shape the civic development and capacity of adolescent participants (for a recent review, see Rogers, Mediratta, and Shah 2012). At the same time, scholars recognize the limits of nonprofit organizations in helping disadvantaged youth overcome personal and community challenges (Eliasoph 2011, 2013; Kwon 2013), raising questions about the lasting impact of these groups on the lives of participants. Do today's YO groups—similar to civil rights groups decades earlier—foster ongoing activism among participants?

Bridging the civic engagement and social movement literatures, this study examines patterns of civic and political participation among young adult alumni of high school YO groups. Drawing

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on survey and interview data from 18- to 26-year-olds in California, I compare the experiences of these alumni with those of a randomly selected sample of young people, including former high school student government leaders. Similar to other public-oriented volunteer associations—such as student government—YO groups impart civic skills and experiences that facilitate later involvement. However, as activist organizations, YO groups develop members' political consciousness and engage them in formal political processes, setting YO groups apart from many other youth associations. As such, I argue that activist groups can function as intensive training grounds for members' future political participation. While nonprofit status constrains the political activity of YO groups, I assert that contemporary activist organizations can nonetheless propel some youth toward ongoing engagement with social movements.

Voluntary Organizations and Youths' Civic and Political Participation

In general, young people exhibit low levels of civic and political participation when compared to older adults (Flanagan and Levine 2010). Although some youth are highly involved, many remain disengaged from public life for a variety of reasons, including a disconnect from social problems, cynicism and hopelessness (Gordon and Taft 2011), an insufficient understanding of how civic and political affairs affect their lives, and instability in their social roles and institutional connections (Flanagan and Levine 2010). Young people's involvement tends to vary by socioeconomic status. This is not surprising, as youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—including those from racial minority and immigrant families—enjoy fewer meaningful opportunities to develop their civic skills and political knowledge than do their higher status counterparts (Garcia Bedolla 2012; Levinson 2012).

Yet voluntary organizations have the potential to help youth engage in public affairs, regardless of their socioeconomic origins. A large body of literature suggests that volunteer organizations instill civic virtues and skills as members learn how to run meetings, express their viewpoints, engage in collective decision making, and resolve common concerns (Fung 2003). The effects of organizational participation during adolescence can be especially pronounced because young people are acquiring durable habits, attitudes, and values that can shape their long-term political interests and commitments (Flanagan and Levine 2010).

Yet voluntary associations vary in the extent to which they meet their stated civic aims or effectively politicize their members. Drawing on analyses of two nationally representative data sets, McFarland and Thomas (2006) find that voluntary associations that do not require much public interaction, the coordination of activities, and debate (e.g., the French club, sports teams, or computer club) fail to orient youth toward later civic and political participation. Meanwhile, those that entail speaking in public forums, community service, and generating a communal identity (such as student government, service groups, and drama club) increase members' participation in their young adulthood. These associations are politically salient because they impart civic experiences, skills, and habits.

McFarland and Thomas's findings align with other studies demonstrating that leadership or volunteer service organizations affect youths' later involvements (Hart et al. 2007; Sax, Astin, and Avalos 1999; Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997). As such, the extant research suggests that young people can acquire a lasting investment in civic and political affairs through developmental experiences in *public-oriented* associations, meaning groups that collectively involve members in activities that require interaction with public audiences or offer a public service. Interestingly, these public-oriented associations do *not* necessarily have to be political—in the sense that they engage members in learning about or tackling electoral politics and government policy debates (Zukin et al. 2006)—to foster ongoing civic and political participation. For example, youth involved in student government typically work together to plan and implement school-wide rallies, school assemblies, dances, and community service activities. In the process of

attending to the mission and purpose of their group, these student government leaders need not engage with elected officials or government bodies (i.e., school boards, state legislators) to acquire civic skills and learn how to effectively perform a public service. Yet there may be a limit in the extent to which apolitical, public-oriented associations such as student government or community service groups prepare young people for future political participation. Such groups do not necessarily encourage members to critique social structures and invest in political solutions to social problems (Eliasoph 2011).

Research on high school civics curricula suggests that engaging youth in addressing social concerns through political processes could further augment interest in civic and political affairs, particularly among young people who belong to marginalized populations (Levinson 2012; Pope, Stolte, and Cohen 2011). The assumption is that adolescents will develop a lasting motivation and know-how to tackle social concerns in a political arena if they acquire a political analysis of social issues and if they gain hands-on experience in policy-oriented collective action. Indeed, empirical research points to the possibility that adolescents' political engagement correlates with greater *interest* in future political participation (Cohen and Chaffee 2013), but it remains unclear the extent to which exposing members of this age group to political processes affects their actual participation later on in life. As Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne's (2004) research on high school–based civic interventions demonstrates, efforts to develop adolescents' political analyses do not necessarily provide them with civic skills to take action regarding political or social issues. Their findings suggest that achieving a balance between building adolescents' civic skills and political awareness may be difficult. Therefore, it remains an open question whether or not associations with a political focus—or what we may call *activist* youth organizations (Flanagan, Syvertsen, and Wray-Lake 2004)—differ from non-activist public-oriented organizations in effectively promoting adolescents' future civic and political participation.

Lessons Learned from the 1960s

While it is difficult to generalize from the effects of 1960s' social movement activism to other time periods (McAdam and Brandt 2009), research on the trajectories of former civil rights movement participants may provide some insight into how contemporary adolescent activist organizations might shape their members' later engagement in public affairs. Retrospective studies of these earlier racially diverse activists suggest that political activism at a formative age can have a profound impact on an individual's long-term civic and political participation (Blackwell 2011; Morris 1999). Young civil rights activists did not simply become involved in mainstream civic activities and politics as they got older; rather, they remained invested in social movements—meaning organized, collective efforts that challenge existing laws, institutional practices, and societal norms (Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004). For example, in his study of Freedom Summer college-age participants, Douglas McAdam (1988) demonstrates that many of these former civil rights activists became involved in, and even led, later social movements. Politics became a central organizing force in the lives of many of these activists, in part, because of the skills they acquired, identities they formed, and networks they developed during the course of their early activism.

We cannot expect most contemporary activism to be as intensive or widespread as it was in the 1960s. However, it is possible that youths' participation in an activist organization today might cultivate an enduring investment in social movement activity.

Nonprofit Grassroots Youth Organizing (YO) Groups

The growth of formal YO groups over the last couple of decades creates opportunities to assess how activist organizations might shape the civic and political trajectories of today's youth,

including in relation to other volunteer associations that do not explicitly focus on formal politics. Typically operated by nonprofit organizations, YO groups seek to involve low-income, racially diverse adolescents in addressing issues that affect them and their communities, such as the criminalization of young people of color, unequal school systems, blocked opportunities for undocumented immigrants, or local environmental and health issues. To some degree, these activist groups appear to be like many other public-oriented, non-activist organizations in that they provide adolescents with a range of civic experiences by creating opportunities for youth to express themselves publicly and collaborate with others to plan activities and events (Rogers et al. 2012).

At the same time, YO groups orient their members toward critical forms of civic engagement (Terriquez 2011) through political education and hands-on campaign work (Christens and Kirshner 2011; Conner, Zaino, and Scarola 2013; Ferman 2012; Ginwright and Cammarota 2007). Political education workshops generally aim to equip their members with the analytical tools to interpret problems in their communities as flowing from larger economic, political, and social structures, rather than simply from individual choices (Watts and Flanagan 2007). Efforts to develop members' political consciousness can include participatory action research on local community problems (i.e., poor access to healthy food) and the adoption of research methodologies known to enhance sociopolitical skills (Ozer and Douglas 2012). Some groups also offer educational activities that instill ethnic pride and promote multicultural awareness. In addition, YO groups engage in campaigns that directly expose their members to grassroots and other strategies for influencing government and other institutional decision-making processes. Adult staff teach youth how to mobilize their peers, research social issues, plan protests, lobby politicians and other decision makers, and/or participate in electoral work (Rogers et al. 2012). Recent ethnographies suggest that this political activity connects adolescents to broader social movement activities in their communities and beyond (Clay 2012; Gordon 2010; Kwon 2013).

Researchers have suggested that contemporary YO groups have a lasting impact on youths' activism (Rogers et al. 2012). For example, Conner's (2011) research involving 25 YO alumni suggests that members continue to be civically engaged after high school. However, it remains unclear whether YO alumni's involvement differs from that of other similar youth and whether these young people maintain ties to social movement efforts in early adulthood.

It is important to recognize the limitations of YO activism that occurs within the context of nonprofit organizations. Notably, YO groups' 501(c)3 statuses as government-granted nonprofit organizations prohibits them from directly taking a position regarding government elections, bars them from engaging in certain types of lobbying, and restricts a few other forms of political activity. YO groups must therefore be careful in how they critically engage young people in the political arena because they can risk fines and be stripped of their nonprofit status.

The ability of YO groups to involve members in activism may also be constrained by the multiple demands placed on these organizations. YO groups, like other nonprofit organizations today, operate in a neoliberal era in which responsibilities of the welfare state have increasingly shifted to individuals and communities (Eliasoph 2011, 2013; Kwon 2013). As Soo Ah Kwon (2013) suggests, YO groups are often expected to resolve broader social problems, placing a significant burden on these organizations to ensure youths' well-being and that of their communities. Consequently, YO groups are charged with addressing a range of individual needs of youth who come from low-income families; developing their members' grassroots organizing and advocacy skills; and managing grassroots campaigns—all while relying on limited financial resources. YO groups' efforts may be further complicated, and their activism curbed, by the fact that nonprofits must also please funders who are sometimes less interested in political activism and more concerned about how groups keep potentially "at-risk" poor, racial minority youth participants safe and out of trouble (Kwon 2013). Moreover, a reliance on tenuous funding streams means that nonprofits, and their youth members, must devote significant time to fundraising activities that detract from regular programming (Eliasoph 2011).

Given the constraints of their nonprofit status (Eliasoph 2011; Kwon 2013), as well as differences in historical contexts (McAdam and Brandt 2009), YO groups cannot be considered modern-day equivalents of 1960s' civil rights organizations. After all, civil rights organizations required significant time commitments and posed serious risks to young adult participants' safety and well-being. In contrast, YO groups, which primarily meet during after-school hours, engage their members—who are still teenagers—in low-risk activism that occurs under the guidance of paid adult staff. Therefore, the extent to which YO groups have a lasting impact on youths' engagement in public affairs, including their ties to social movement activity, is ripe for investigation.

Present Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine how adolescent activist organizations shape their members' civic and political participation in early adulthood. I do so by comparing patterns of participation among young adult alumni members of nonprofit YO groups with those of other young people from similar backgrounds, including individuals involved in one other type of public-oriented volunteer association—high school student government. I generally assess whether former membership in YO groups correlates with greater civic and political participation in early adulthood. I also examine how organizational experiences in adolescence, as well as young adult civic and political activity, differ for former members of the activist and non-activist groups featured here. While I recognize that YO members tend to organize in response to institutional problems while student government leaders choose to be active *within* an institution, this comparative analysis nevertheless allows me to investigate whether or not and how these groups differentially build their members' civic capacity and orient them toward participation in formal political processes. In addition, this comparison allows me to better evaluate the extent to which these nonprofit groups orient their members toward ongoing social movement activity.

My analysis relies on data from California, a state where children from immigrant families outnumber those from non-immigrant families and young people of color outnumber White youth. As such, this study lends itself to examining patterns of participation among low-income youth of color who often lack sufficient opportunities to develop their civic skills and political knowledge (Garcia Bedolla 2012; Levinson 2012). At the same time, such youth may have more opportunities to participate in social-movement related activities in California than those who reside in other states. California is home to a large immigrant rights movement, a comparatively strong labor movement, and a fairly visible gay rights movement. In addition, the state hosts a significant number of education justice, juvenile justice, environmental justice, and other organizations that cater to the interests and needs of low-income, racially diverse populations.

Data

Data come from the California Young Adult Study (CYAS), a mixed-methods investigation of transitions to adulthood among 18–26-year-old youth who attended school in California before the age of 17. I rely on information gathered from two samples of youth: (1) alumni of YO groups that involve high school adolescents in grassroots campaigns and (2) a randomly selected sample that includes former members of high school student government.

The YO sample comes from the alumni rosters of eight organizations with a 10-year minimum track record of engaging inner-city high school adolescents in social justice campaigns. These organizations are based in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles County, and Fresno. The survey sample was obtained from available membership rosters from 2004 to 2011 and contains data from 410 youths ages 18–26 who participated in these organizations while still in high school. The response rate was 77.3 percent.

I also draw on data from semi-structured interviews with 84 alumni who took the survey. Interviews, conducted by trained members of the research team and by me, lasted between 40 minutes to nearly three hours. A project manager reviewed interviewer's work to ensure consistency among the research team. Interviewees were selected based on their race/ethnicity, gender, and other demographic characteristics using quota sampling. Because of funding limitations, first available respondents primarily residing in the greater Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Areas were selected for interviews. Among other information, interviewers collected data on respondents' reasons for joining their YO group, their experience in their YO group, and on the nature of their civic and political activities since leaving high school. I also use interviews with YO staff to obtain information about organizations' programming and to triangulate data gathered from youth.

This study also relies on data collected from a randomly selected sample of youth, hereinafter referred to as the "general population." This sample was recruited through random digit dialing of landline telephones and cell phones in California. Landlines in high poverty census tracts were oversampled for the purpose of the broader study. Survey data were collected from 2,200 respondents, including 288 individuals who participated in high school student government. When sampling weights are used in analyses of data, the results are representative of the study population.[1]

I also analyze semi-structured interview data collected from random sample survey participants. For the purpose of the broader study, interview data were collected from 175 individuals. Again, I selected respondents using quota sampling based on demographics, interviewing the first available respondents primarily residing in the greater Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Area. Here, I report on findings from 21 individuals from the broader sample who had participated in high school student government. I do not claim that these interviewees are representative of all student government participants in the state.

Measures and Analysis

By comparing the experiences of YO alumni with those of the general population, including former student government leaders, survey data allow me to cautiously explore how YO groups orient young people toward civic and political participation. This is a complex undertaking given potential problems stemming from selection bias and differences in sampling methodology.

Survey data are cross-sectional and cannot account for self-selection into YO groups as well as into student government. Therefore, it is hard to tease out the effects of organizational participation from the individual-level unmeasured characteristics (such as motivation) that prompted adolescents to join their group in the first place. Retrospective in-depth interview data indicate the various reasons why adolescents joined these organizations, making self-selection more transparent (see the appendix). The primary reason youth give for joining these civic associations (especially YO groups) is peer encouragement to do so or simply a desire to "hang out" with friends. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that up to a third of respondents in each group were motivated to join based on the focus or purpose of their organization. Understanding youths' selection into these groups helps contextualize the ways in which organizations shape the civic development of their members and also provides some insight into how to interpret survey findings.

Differences in sampling methods present another methodological concern. The YO sample is based on all available records of 18–26-year-olds who participated in eight groups during high school, while the general population sample (that includes student government leaders) is based on stratified random sampling.

Researchers employ a variety of methodological approaches to addressing selection issues, including regression analysis, instrumental variables, propensity score matching, and mixed-methods research (Axinn and Pearce 2006; Harding 2003; Stuart 2010). I therefore utilize a few

approaches to examine the association between YO group membership and civic and political participation in early adulthood. I begin by providing descriptive statistics for the YO, entire general population, and student government samples. Outcome variables consist of five dummy variables measuring different forms of participation that vary in terms of time commitment and social or political impact. Two are frequently used indicators of civic engagement: volunteering (whether or not the respondent reported volunteering in the past year) and community involvement (whether or not the respondent reported working with others to address a community issue within the last year). Social media has grown to become an important medium for youth civic engagement (Kahne, Lee, and Feezell 2013); therefore, the third measure aims to account for online voice (whether or not the respondent reported sharing online his or her perspective on a political/social issue within the last year). The last two measures focus on political participation and indicate involvement in a protest or public rally within the past year and whether or not the respondent has registered to vote. I also present descriptive statistics for key predictor variables of civic and political participation and other key measures. I use significance tests to assess differences among the unweighted samples because weights do not exist for YO alumni.

Next, I use propensity score matching to examine the civic and political participation of YO alumni in relation to the entire general population (including former student government leaders). This methodology is sometimes used to compare random and non-random samples (D'Agostino 1998; Rivers, Huggins, and Slotwiner 2003). I use key predictor variables of civic and political participation—parental education, youths' college enrollment, age, gender, and U.S. citizenship (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Wong et al. 2011)—to match each YO alumnus with a similar respondent from the general population. (I recognize that matching on college enrollment may result in conservative estimates because YO groups support the academic achievement of members.) While there are many options for matching algorithms, I simply match one-to-one without replacement because the general population sample contains enough individuals with similar backgrounds (and propensity scores) to successfully match all individuals in the YO sample. (Imposing a caliper of .01 does not change substantive findings presented below.) Because of significant socioeconomic differences between the YO alumni and student government leaders, I do not use propensity score matching to compare these two groups.

Following, I present results from unweighted logistic regression analyses to further compare YO alumni with the general population, as well as to former student government leaders. I control for the same variables used in propensity score matching. Finally, I share results from semi-structured interviews. Fully transcribed interviews were initially coded into broad topical categories and then recoded inductively based on emerging themes, with an eye towards identifying how YO and student government groups prepare young people for future involvements. I also use these data to assess youths' connections to social movement efforts. I use pseudonyms in reporting findings and share representative interview excerpts, some of which are edited for clarity.

Survey Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for YO alumni and both weighted and unweighted statistics for the general population. The top panel of the table shows results for the dependent variables, which measure youths' civic and political participation. Results indicate that young people who were very civically engaged in high school remain so as they transition to adulthood. Significance tests indicate that individuals in the YO alumni sample are more likely to volunteer, participate in community involvement, and express an opinion online than both the entire general population and a subsample of student government leaders ($p < .001$). Notably, the majority of YO alumni attended a political protest or rally (suggesting links to social movement efforts), whereas only 13 percent of the entire general population and 18 percent of student government leaders

Table 1. Sample Descriptions California Young Adult Study, 2011.

	YO alumni	General population (weighted)	General population (unweighted)	Student government leaders (unweighted)
Youth civic and political participation				
Volunteer	71%	46%	48%***	62%*
Community work	65%	27%	27%***	44%***
Online voice	56%	30%	32%***	44%**
Attended protest	51%	13%	13%***	18%***
Registered to vote (excludes non-citizens)	75%	68%	64%***	73%
Demographic characteristics				
Family socioeconomic background				
College educated parent	15%	35%	33%***	43%***
Low income background	88%	38%	46%***	37%***
Postsecondary educational enrollment				
No college	30%	35%	32%	43%
Attended a community college	25%	32%	34%***	20%
Attended/graduated from 4-year college	45%	33%	34%***	51%
Average age	20.6	21.3	21.1***	20.9
Gender				
Male	36%	52%	47%***	34%
Female	64%	48%	53%***	66%
Race/ethnicity				
Latino	58%	44%	46%***	41%***
White	1%	35%	35%***	36%***
Asian/Pacific Islander	23%	11%	10%***	13%***
Black	11%	6%	5%***	6%*
Multi-racial/other	7%	4%	4%***	4%
Immigrant family	81%	54%	54%	51%***
Noncitizen	18%	8%	6%	4%***
Unweighted sample size	410	2,200	2,200	288

Note. Significance tests indicate whether YO alumni differ from the general population and student government leaders.
Results from bivariate two-tailed tests: *$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

participated in a protest. Those in the YO alumni sample who are U.S. citizens were somewhat more likely to register to vote than citizens in the entire general population ($p < .01$), but they are about as likely to do so compared to student government leaders who are citizens (n.s.).

The bottom panel of Table 1 contains demographic information. YO alumni disproportionately come from lower socioeconomic, racial minority, immigrant, and non-citizen backgrounds. They also exhibit higher rates of 4-year postsecondary school attendance than the general population, likely due to the academic support YO groups provide members (Gordon 2010). Like student government leaders, YO alumni are disproportionately women and attend 4-year colleges at high rates. In contrast to YO alumni, student government leaders exhibit somewhat higher socioeconomic backgrounds than the general population.

The top panel of Table 2 shows propensity score matching results. Findings indicate that YO alumni exhibit higher levels of civic and political participation across all outcome measures than

Table 2. Propensity Score Matching and Logistic Regression Results. Comparing the Civic and Political Participation of YO Alumni and General Population.

	Volunteer (N = 2,610)			Community involvement (N = 2,610)			Online voice (N = 2,610)			Protest (N = 2,610)			Register to vote (N = 2,397)		
	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI
Propensity score matching results															
Youth organizer	1.218***	(0.041)	[1.141, 1.301]	1.481***	(0.040)	[1.391, 1.577]	1.279***	(0.043)	[1.198, 1.366]	1.459***	(0.044)	[1.373, 1.544]	1.126***	(0.040)	[1.050, 1.207]
Logistic regression results (unweighted)															
Youth organizer	2.512***	(0.306)	[1.979, 3.190]	5.481***	(0.663)	[4.324, 6.948]	2.848***	(0.329)	[2.271, 3.571]	6.505***	(0.803)	[5.107, 8.285]	1.806***	(0.279)	[1.335, 2.444]
Parent with BA degree	1.594***	(0.149)	[1.327, 1.915]	1.649***	(0.165)	[1.355, 2.005]	1.400***	(0.134)	[1.161, 1.688]	1.082	(0.135)	[0.848, 1.381]	1.297*	(0.151)	[1.032, 1.630]
Postsecondary enrollment															
Community college	0.893	(0.093)	[0.728, 1.096]	0.786*	(0.093)	[0.623, 0.992]	1.197	(0.134)	[0.961, 1.490]	1.145	(0.168)	[0.859, 1.526]	2.527***	(0.296)	[2.009, 3.180]
4-year college	1.724***	(0.191)	[1.388, 2.143]	1.421**	(0.168)	[1.126, 1.792]	1.761***	(0.202)	[1.407, 2.205]	1.731***	(0.254)	[1.299, 2.307]	4.494***	(0.605)	[3.453, 5.851]
Age	0.895***	(0.016)	[0.864, 0.926]	0.972	(0.019)	[0.936, 1.010]	0.996	(0.018)	[0.961, 1.033]	0.937**	(0.023)	[0.893, 0.982]	1.365***	(0.033)	[1.302, 1.430]
Male	0.903	(0.074)	[0.768, 1.060]	0.934	(0.084)	[0.783, 1.115]	1.189*	(0.101)	[1.005, 1.405]	1.077	(0.118)	[0.869, 1.334]	0.903	(0.091)	[0.741, 1.101]
Noncitizen	1.157	(0.177)	[0.857, 1.562]	0.994	(0.165)	[0.718, 1.376]	1.051	(0.165)	[0.772, 1.430]	1.584**	(0.281)	[1.119, 2.243]			

Note. CI = confidence interval.

Source: CYAS 2011

Two-tailed tests: *p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.

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similar youth from the entire general population. Highly significant odds ratios ranging in size from 1.1 to 1.5 ($p < .001$) lend support to prior research that indicates that adolescent YO groups motivate ongoing civic and political participation (Conner 2011; Rogers et al. 2012). However, propensity score matching does not eliminate all potential bias from unobserved factors that could affect the results.

The bottom panel of Table 2 shows results from logistic regression analyses that examine the correlation between adolescent YO membership and civic and political participation in early adulthood, controlling for parental education, youths' college enrollment, age, gender, and citizenship status. Again, the comparison group is the entire general population. With the exception of registering to vote, results from logistic regression analyses yield much larger odds ratios than those displayed in propensity score matching results. For example, findings indicate that individuals in the YO sample are several times more likely than the general population to become involved in the community and to protest, after controlling for other determinants of participation. Again, these findings indicate that adolescent YO group membership correlates with greater likelihoods of civic and political participation in young adulthood, but results should not be interpreted as population estimates given the methodological issues discussed earlier.

Table 3 compares the civic and political participation of student government leaders (reference group) to that of YO alumni and the remaining general population. The results indicate that, with the exception of registering to vote, student government leaders are more likely to participate in civic and political activities than their peers in the general population, after accounting for other variables in the regression model. In addition, findings indicate that as former members of activist organizations, those in the YO alumni sample are significantly more likely than student government leaders to volunteer, become involved in their community, express their viewpoints online, and protest ($p < .001$), after controlling for other predictors. These findings point to the possibility that adolescent YO groups, when compared to student government groups, have a greater impact on members' later civic and political participation. Yet it is also possible that YO alumni's greater involvement relative to their peers in student government may, at least in part, be attributed to differences in the inherent interests of members of these two groups, as well as to different sampling methods used to gather data from the two groups. I therefore turn to in-depth interview data to examine some of the social mechanisms underlying survey findings and to assess youths' lasting ties to social movement activity.

Semi-structured Interview Findings

Interview data gathered from YO staff confirm earlier research indicating that nonprofit organizations must meet multiple demands (Eliasoph 2011, 2013; Kwon 2013); YO groups devote significant time to fundraising as well as providing members academic support and other educational services to compensate for college counseling and academic assistance not readily available at inner-city high schools. In addition, staff must sometimes refer members or their families to services that resolve financial, housing, legal, or other problems.

In spite of the competing and multiple demands placed on nonprofit YO groups, interview data gathered from young people themselves indicate that these activist organizations, similar to high school student government, build members' civic capacities. At the same time, YO alumni's retrospective accounts suggest that high rates of civic and political participation evidenced in survey data can, in part, be attributed to the political consciousness and understanding of political processes that they uniquely developed in high school. YO alumni's ongoing level of connection to social movement-related activity, however, varies. YO alumni nonethelessremain significantly more involved in social movement and other community affairs than former student government leaders.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results Comparing Student Government and Youth Organizing Alumni, Unweighted Results.

	Volunteer (N = 2,610)			Community involvement (N = 2,610)			Online voice (N = 2,610)			Protest (N = 2,610)			Register to vote (N = 2,397)		
	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI
Group—ref. student government															
Youth organizing	1.640**	(0.276)	[1.179, 2.282]	2.876***	(0.472)	[2.085, 3.967]	1.792***	(0.287)	[1.308, 2.454]	4.672***	(0.877)	[3.233, 6.750]	1.417	(0.300)	[0.936, 2.146]
General population[a]	0.611***	(0.082)	[0.470, 0.794]	0.466***	(0.062)	[0.358, 0.605]	0.579***	(0.077)	[0.447, 0.751]	0.675*	(0.116)	[0.482, 0.945]	0.755	(0.127)	[0.543, 1.049]
Parent with BA degree	1.572***	(0.148)	[1.307, 1.890]	1.616***	(0.163)	[1.326, 1.968]	1.377***	(0.132)	[1.142, 1.662]	1.068	(0.133)	[0.837, 1.364]	1.284*	(0.150)	[1.021, 1.614]
Postsecondary enrollment															
Community college	0.905	(0.095)	[0.738, 1.111]	0.803	(0.096)	[0.635, 1.015]	1.218	(0.137)	[0.977, 1.519]	1.158	(0.170)	[0.868, 1.545]	2.556***	(0.300)	[2.030, 3.217]
4-year college	1.672***	(0.186)	[1.344, 2.081]	1.355*	(0.162)	[1.071, 1.713]	1.706***	(0.197)	[1.361, 2.139]	1.696***	(0.249)	[1.271, 2.263]	4.433***	(0.597)	[3.404, 5.773]
Age	0.898***	(0.016)	[0.867, 0.929]	0.978	(0.019)	[0.941, 1.017]	1.001	(0.018)	[0.965, 1.037]	0.939*	(0.023)	[0.895, 0.985]	1.369***	(0.033)	[1.306, 1.435]
Male	0.927	(0.076)	[0.788, 1.090]	0.978	(0.089)	[0.818, 1.169]	1.228*	(0.106)	[1.038, 1.454]	1.100	(0.121)	[0.887, 1.364]	0.913	(0.092)	[0.749, 1.113]
Noncitizen	1.174	(0.180)	[0.869, 1.587]	1.019	(0.170)	[0.735, 1.413]	1.067	(0.168)	[0.784, 1.454]	1.602**	(0.285)	[1.130, 2.270]			

Note. CI = confidence interval.

Source: CYAS 2011

[a]Excludes members of student government.

Two-tailed tests: *$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

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Civic Learning—Speaking Up and Working Together

The explicit political activism of YO groups sets them apart from non-activist public-oriented organizations. Yet, findings suggest that these nonprofit organizations, like their non-activist counterparts, inculcate their members with basic civic skills that are transferrable both to political and non-political settings. In line with a broad body of literature that highlights the role of volunteer associations in contributing to the functioning of democratic institutions (Fung 2003), both YO and student government groups enhanced members' civic skills by requiring their members to devote significant time to collaborating and communicating with others to achieve shared goals. In this regard, both groups appear to similarly facilitate their members' ongoing engagement in civic affairs, in spite of socioeconomic differences between members of both groups, as well as varying reasons why young people joined their respective organizations.

Interview data reveal that both YO and student government groups fostered members' abilities to interact with others and give public presentations. There were members of both groups who, when asked what they got out of their high school involvement, made statements such as, "it helped me come out of my shell" and "it made it easier to get in front of the mic." For example, Thuan, a Vietnamese American young man who joined his YO group in the 10th grade, echoed the sentiments of several YO alumni who believed that their organization transformed their ability to relate to others. He explained, "I was really shy, but getting involved made me a lot more outgoing." Thuan recalled that, as part of his campaign efforts to reform the juvenile justice system, he had to speak to people he didn't know and make presentations in classroom and other settings. Similarly, Emiko, a soft-spoken 18-year-old, also developed a public voice after being involved in student government. "I've always been shy and not much of a public speaker, but I think it gave me a little bit more confidence. I realize that it is now easier to go up in front of a class and just talk," she claimed.

In both YO and student government groups, there were individuals who likely possessed strong interpersonal social skills when they joined their respective organizations. These young people nonetheless expanded their abilities to engage with the public as a result of their group membership. For example, Bethany, a talkative 18-year-old YO alumnus, described her own experience: "You had to speak in front of people—so I had the opportunity to become more comfortable with speaking in front of large crowds." Likewise, there were individuals in student government who became accustomed to being on stage in front of the whole school.

Members of YO and student government groups learned to take charge of planning and implementing activities that involved diverse individuals, including authority figures. In coordinating events and collaborating with others, study participants also developed social confidence and problem-solving abilities. For example, Daisy, who had worked on a YO campaign to increase college access for low-income youth, explained, "I learned how to organize an event, run things . . . to be the leader of something and get it done." Similarly, Mey, who was recruited to student government by her friends, recalled, "It gave me a new appreciation for the things that went into planning and organizing events . . . If something went wrong, you would have to come up with different ideas on your feet." A number of youth from both groups also mentioned how their high school experience taught them to work with peers and adults. For example, Stephen summarized what he gained from serving as an elected member of student government: "I was able to get some leadership experience and work with school officials, as well as my classmates, to accomplish different projects. I learned how to be a better leader and listen to people." Meanwhile, for Daniel, a YO alumnus, meeting with elected school board members stood out as an important part of his personal growth. This experience meant "overcoming being intimidated by someone who conducts themselves more professionally than you do."

Overall, retrospective interview data suggest that YO groups, like student government and other volunteer organizations examined in other research (Hart et al. 2007; McFarland and Thomas 2006; Sax et al. 1999), enhance participants' civic skills. In this regard, adolescent YO groups are similar to other public-oriented organizations that bolster their members' later participation.

Politics in Practice and Perception

"If it weren't for my involvement, I probably wouldn't have thought about politics or social justice and changing my community in that particular way," explained Meagan. As a high school YO member, she worked on a campaign to expand health services in the San Francisco public school system and also participated in efforts to educate voters about a local measure that would increase funding for local youth services. Meagan learned in-depth information about issues negatively affecting her community and about the different government offices and leaders that needed to be pressured to expand resources for young people. Meagan's experience reflects that of most other YO alumni who acquired the ability to critically analyze social problems affecting their communities and learned how to address some of these problems through political processes. Such critical civic engagement likely further facilitated YO alumni members' participation in early adulthood and stands in contrast to the experiences of student government leaders who did not receive a similar exposure to conventional or protest politics.

YO-sponsored education workshops and other activities developed members' political consciousness. As suggested by earlier research, such educational activities—typically focused on promoting a critical understanding of social inequalities—prompted YO members to perceive issues and problems in their lives and communities through a political lens (Ginwright and Cammarota 2007; Ozer and Douglas 2012; Watts and Flanagan 2007). For example, Patrick, who got involved in a juvenile justice campaign in high school, recalled, "We had weekly classes on different issues like racism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia. It was all very political." Many commented that their groups taught them how to analyze everyday problems: "It was like removing a blindfold," explained Jorge, an Oakland resident who learned about structural causes of violence and low educational attainment in his community. Similarly, Mahala, who attended an Oakland high school plagued by interracial conflict and a significant racial gap in academic achievement, believed that as a result of this political education, she could better comprehend the problems around her: "You understand the roots of our issues and get a better understanding of what you need to do to shift things." Importantly, exposure to contentious political issues also taught YO alumni that change was possible, sometimes by imparting lessons learned from the civil rights or other social movements. Like others, Tonya found this training inspirational: "Before [I joined] I was in the same boat as other people. I didn't have the power to change anything. I started to realize there could be a potential for change when they started talking about past accomplishments."

YO groups provided members with different types of roadmaps for how to take collective action on political issues in the future. Depending on the types of campaign strategies YO groups pursued, alumni learned how to address their concerns through the electoral process, meeting with government officials, and/or the mobilizations of community members. For example, 20-year-old Xochilt recounted her high school experience: "We educated the community about laws, senate bills or propositions. We made sure people were aware what those were so that they wouldn't make decisions [on how to vote] based of what sounded nice on the T.V." Meanwhile, Juan, an immigrant from Mexico and a Los Angeles resident, recounted his YO group's trip to Sacramento: "I learned a little bit about how the state government worked when we lobbied for two bills—the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights . . . and the California DREAM Act." Although

not all conducted voter outreach or lobbied Sacramento officials, the majority of YO members became familiar with some of the steps involved in grassroots organizing campaigns, including door-to-door canvassing, collecting signatures on petitions, one-to-one recruitment of supporters, and organizing rallies and protests.

In contrast, student government activities did not develop leaders' political consciousness or expose participants to government processes. When asked whether their organization was political, most responses aligned with that of Mandy: "We focused on school spirit and events, not on politics." However, a couple of former leaders perceived student government activities as political, at least in the formalistic sense. For example, Ravi claimed, "There is some politics involved because people have different opinions and they have different ways of thinking about things, and you have to work with that." Meanwhile, Mariana, a former student body president, stated, "It was political. We had the voting for prom king and prom queen, and there was also getting voted into office." While school spirit and related activities may not have contributed to student government leaders' analyses of broader social and political issues, they served as a basic introduction to the conflicts and compromises that occur on a larger political playing field.

Nonprofit Activism and Social Movement Participation

In addition to educating members about past social movements, YO groups connected their grassroots campaigns to broad, contemporary social movement efforts—including those focused on education justice, immigration reform, or racial justice. However, the degree to which YO alumni continued their participation in some type of movement-related activity—whether focused on the same or different issues they addressed in high school—varied significantly.[2]

A noteworthy proportion of YO alumni, about one-fifth, became deeply embedded in social-movement-related activities in their early adulthood. Whether their causes focused on educational equity; labor rights; environmental justice; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights; anti-poverty initiatives; immigrant rights; or other efforts, these young people almost always traced their current activism to their high school experience. The story of Cliff reflects that of other committed activists. In high school, Cliff participated in a campaign to improve college access for inner-city youth. "I learned that young people like myself have the power to actually engage other people around these really huge issues—that people like myself can make a difference through organizing," he said. "When people get together and organize, the community can show some strength." Now a 23-year-old community college student, Cliff found himself leading a campus organization that seeks to improve retention and graduation rates for African American students. Part of this work entailed politicizing his peers and getting them involved in efforts to pressure college administrators to expand student services. He has also participated in get-out-the-vote efforts and other campaigns in his community. Twenty-four-year-old Nayeli is another alumnus who has assumed leadership roles since high school. An immigrant young woman with former gang ties, Nayeli felt that she "gained a purpose" through her YO group involvement. Since high school, Nayeli has been involved in several campaigns including those focused on expanding after-school youth programs, stopping police brutality, and immigration reform.

Cliff, Nayeli, and others like them, acquired the capacity and inspiration to commit significant time to advancing social justice causes. The majority of YO alumni, however, participated in community or political affairs on an occasional basis. Having moved on to college, work, and other adult responsibilities, these young people developed other priorities. They were like Norma, a community college student whose main focus was getting good grades so she could transfer to a 4-year university. Norma explained that the "organizing work was very draining." She added, "I've learned to put a balance between school and organizing." Although Norma was regularly

invited to immigrant rights rallies and other efforts, she selectively participated and relied on other people to take a leadership role.[3]

For many YO alumni, sporadic involvement usually took place within college campus organizations, where youth organized or attended events focused on a range of social and political issues. For example, Clarissa moved away from East Los Angeles to attend a 4-year college. She felt that her classmates were "very privileged students" and out of touch with the realities of marginalized groups. She therefore chose to volunteer at the school's Multicultural Center to raise awareness of social justice issues. As former members of a nonprofit after-school program, Norma, Clarissa, and some others like them had scaled back their activism during their early adulthood.

About a fourth of YO alumni interviewees had not been involved in any civic groups, nor in any campaign efforts since high school. These young people were not necessarily apathetic, but they had more pressing concerns or interests. Academic challenges were a common reason given; as graduates from low-performing high schools, YO alumni are like many other low-income students who must devote extra time to their studies to compensate for poor academic preparation (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). For example, 24-year-old Priscilla explained:

> I feel really overwhelmed with school. I just can't make the time. My grades are really a priority, but I definitely try to stay up to date with my local elections and reading on the candidates and stuff like that, but I'm not involved in anything serious, sadly.

There were a few interviewees who wanted to take advantage of opportunities that their college offered. For example, Marco, an 18-year-old immigrant and first-year university student, had made it a priority to participate in new activities: "I just feel like varying my experiences a bit more. That's not to say I've completely abandoned the campaign [for the DREAM Act], but I think it's a good thing to sort of vary what you're in."

The uninvolved also included young people who assumed significant family or financial responsibilities in early adulthood. In this regard, YO groups did not have a lasting impact on members' abilities to overcome financial, time, and other constraints often experienced by young people who grow up in poverty (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997; Duncan and Murnane 2011) and that can stymie civic and political participation (Verba et al. 1995). Twenty-four-year-old Tonya, who lacked family financial support, shared a compelling reason for her recent lack of involvement: "I was pregnant, and I was mostly looking for a job." Meanwhile Robbie, who helps support his parents who earn very low wages, offered a different explanation: "I just work a lot." In spite of their inactivity, almost all of the uninvolved YO alumni claimed to maintain interest in community or political issues. Only time will determine whether any of these young people will ever resume any such involvement.

As a point of comparison, most former student government leaders claimed to vote and follow government elections, but less than half indicated any other significant personal investment in civic or political activities. Those involved participated in generally apolitical social or service organizations on their college campuses or in the community (i.e., one volunteered at a homeless shelter, another at a hospital). However, one had volunteered for an electoral campaign and another participated in social movement-related college campus activism that resembled the activity of many YO alumni. Notably, student government leaders participated much less frequently in any civic activities than the average YO alumni; these differences in the regularity of participation are not captured by survey results presented earlier.

Overall, interview findings suggest that YO groups can plant the seeds of social movement activism. In this regard, YO groups directly orient their members to contemporary social movements in ways that other public-oriented associations may not.

Discussion

As organizations that engage youth from marginalized populations in the public arena, YO groups have received significant attention in the last couple of decades from policy makers, private foundations, and academics (Rogers et al. 2012; Torres-Fleming, Valdes, and Pillai 2010). Recent studies have described how YO groups actively engage young people in addressing social issues through political campaigns (Clay 2012; Conner et al. 2013; Ferman 2012; Gordon 2010; Gordon and Taft 2011; Kwon 2013;). Nonetheless, prior research had yet to systematically explore the lasting impact of YO group membership on youths' subsequent involvement in civic affairs. This study fills a gap in the literature by examining patterns of civic and political participation of YO alumni members. Analyses of survey data gathered from youth in California indicate that YO alumni exhibit a greater likelihood of participation in early adulthood than young people from similar backgrounds, thus offering support for research hypothesizing that these groups catalyze future civic and political engagement among marginalized youth (Conner 2011; Rogers et al. 2012). These findings align with prior investigations demonstrating that public-oriented youth organizations foster lasting participation (Hart et al. 2007; McFarland and Thomas 2006; Sax et al. 1999). However, I also consider whether YO groups—as activist volunteer associations that engage youth in political solutions to social problems—differ from non-activist public-oriented associations in how they shape their members' civic and political trajectories. In comparing patterns of participation between YO alumni and former student government members, I present tentative evidence suggesting that adolescent membership in activist organizations is associated with greater civic and political participation in early adulthood than adolescent membership in public-oriented associations. These survey findings, however, must be interpreted with caution due to methodological limitations.

Interview results help illuminate similarities and differences in the civic and political development between YO alumni and former student government leaders. Regardless of the self-selection mechanisms that prompted young people to join their respective groups, interview findings show that both types of volunteer associations build their members' civic capacity by providing them with opportunities to engage with public audiences and work collaboratively to accomplish common goals. But unlike student government members, YO alumni described how their adolescent involvement helped them develop a critical analysis of issues that affected their lives and shared how they directly sought to resolve concerns in a political arena. While striking a balance between developing the political consciousness and civic capacity of adolescents may be difficult (Westheimer and Kahne 2004), YO groups manage to achieve both through educational activities that politicize members and hands-on campaign work.

These findings suggest that activist organizations that critically engage youth in politics can foster young people's civic participation to a degree that exceeds that of non-activist public-oriented organizations. In this regard, results support prior research that highlights the limitations of volunteer organizations that avoid political issues. While conferring useful civic skills (Fung 2003), such organizations do not necessarily prompt young people to think about the political causes and solutions to issues that matter to them (Eliasoph 2011). Meanwhile, findings from YO members offer support for the proposition that engaging young people in political or policy-oriented approaches to community issues amplifies their interest—and ability to remain involved—in public affairs (Cohen and Chaffee 2013; Levinson 2012; Pope et al. 2011).

This study also uniquely investigates the link between contemporary adolescents' organizational participation and their ties to social movement activity in early adulthood. While involvement in 1960s' civil rights organizations helped inspire lasting social movement participation among members of an earlier generation (Blackwell 2011; McAdam 1988; Morris 1999), the connection between YO groups and ongoing social movement activity remained in question. After all, YO groups' political activity is tempered by their 501(c)3 status and the

competing demands placed on these organizations in a declining welfare state (Eliasoph 2011, 2013; Kwon 2013).

In spite of these limitations, my findings indicate that the majority of alumni maintained some connections to social movement activity (and were certainly more regularly involved in civic affairs than their student government counterparts). However, only a minority remained deeply embedded in activism. As they entered young adulthood, most youth— whether they were occasionally engaged in movement-related activity or not—developed other priorities while still maintaining an interest in politics. This may in fact signal a healthy transition to adulthood (Shanahan 2000). Yet, there were also others who confronted poverty-related challenges that stunted their activism. As such, whether former YO members prioritize activism, and are able to overcome structural barriers to such involvement, may simply remain beyond the influence of these nonprofit groups. YO groups can only go so far in addressing the multiple needs of low-income inner-city youth while still training them to become activists.

Regardless of the limitations that nonprofits encounter in supporting political activism, this study points toward the need to make analytical and conceptual distinctions between volunteer organizations based on whether or not they critically engage their members in the political arena. Such distinctions will contribute to a better understanding of how civic associations reinforce the status quo or engage individuals—particularly those from marginalized groups who have the most to gain from the success of social movements in a highly unequal society—in supporting broader social change.

Implications

Because this investigation relies on retrospective, cross-sectional survey data from a non-random sample, survey results cannot be used to estimate the absolute size of the effect of YO group membership on lasting participation. Future longitudinal research that includes White and middle-class populations should aim to account for selection into different types of activist groups (including those with conservative agendas) to precisely measure the lasting effects of activist groups on members' civic and political participation, including their social movement involvement. In addition, further investigation can examine whether activist group involvement continues to affect alumni members' participation as they enter later adulthood. Ongoing involvement in early adulthood may solidify youths' commitment to social activism. Alternatively, as they age, former youth activists may burn out or grow disillusioned.

Importantly, this study has implications for interventions that seek to foster civic and political participation among low-income, racial minority, immigrant, and other youth who encounter limited opportunities for involvement (Garcia Bedolla 2012; Levinson 2012). Interventions can borrow from YO groups' approach to critical civic engagement by developing young people's political consciousness and directly engaging them in addressing issues that affect their communities. The impact of such an approach to supporting youth civic and political participation is unlikely to be trivial. As one YO alumnus passionately argued:

> You learn that politics is not this big faraway thing; politics is in your high school, your city council, your state. And you learn that you could make a difference, and it's not somewhere down the line, but it's right here, right now.

Appendix

Reasons for Joining Organization.

	Youth Organizing Alumni		Student Government	
	(*n* = 84)		(*n* = 21)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Peers/social (spend time with friends, recruited by peers)	56	67	7	33
Liked focus or purpose of organization	27	32	6	29
Personal connection to issue	22	26	0	0
Skill building and college resume	9	11	5	24
Recommended by teacher/counselor/family member	9	11	1	5
Recruited by staff of organization	6	7	0	0
Free food	7	8	0	0
Stipend	5	6	0	0
Status/popularity	0	0	6	29

Source: CYAS 2011

Notes

1. Survey response rates exceeded 56 percent and were above average for random sample telephone surveys, largely due the fact that potential respondents were called up to 31 times and received $30 incentives.
2. The variability in ties to social movement activity did not differ across the eight organizations included in this study.
3. Norma's story also suggests that she faces activist burnout; only a few other youth shared a similar experience.

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