Youth civic engagement and developmental competencies: An examination of age-specific links

Aaron Metzger, Amy K. Syvertsen, Laura Wray-Lake, Benjamin Oosterhoff, Elizabeth Babskie, Lauren Alvis
Youth Civic Engagement

- **Vital for community health and democratic process** (Flanagan, 2005; Levine, 2013)

- **An important individual developmental outcome and process** (Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009)
Previous Research on Youth Civic Engagement

- **Developmental progression:**
  - Focus on late adolescence and early adulthood
  - Little attention to age-specific associations

- **Lack of an integrative model:**
  - Multiple facets of normative development
  - Diverse aspects of civic engagement
Developmental Competencies

• **Emotional competencies**
  – Emotional understanding, emotion regulation, affective motivation (Cole et al., 2009; Côté et al., 2011; Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007; Kanacri et al., 2013; Mueller et al., 2011)
  – **Empathy** (Bekkers, 2005; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1995)

• **Social-cognitive competencies**
  – Perspective taking, prosocial moral reasoning (Carlo et al. 2012; Hoffman, 2000; Metzger & Smetana, 2010)

• **Cognitive competencies**
  – Future-mindedness, critical information analysis (Callina et al., 2014; Finlay, Wray-Lake et al., 2015; Steinberg, 2008)
Developmental Competencies

• **Emotional competencies**
  – Emotional understanding, *emotion regulation*, affective motivation
    (Cole et al., 2009; Côté et al., 2011; Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007; Kanacri et al., 2013; Mueller et al., 2011)
  – **Empathy** (Bekkers, 2005; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1995)

• **Social-cognitive competencies**
  – Perspective taking, *prosocial moral reasoning*
    (Carlo et al. 2012; Hoffman, 2000; Metzger & Smetana, 2010)

• **Cognitive competencies**
  – Future-mindedness, *critical information analysis*
    (Callina et al., 2014; Finlay, Wray-Lake et al., 2015; Steinberg, 2008)
Study Goals

• Examine associations among youth developmental competencies and distinct components of civic engagement.

• Assess age-specific associations among:
  – Elementary School
  – Middle School
  – High School
Sample:
3 Geographic Locations
Sample

- 2467 youth (55.7% female)

- Age
  - $M_{\text{age}} = 13.35$, $SD = 2.66$
  - Range = 10 – 19

- Grades 4 – 12
  - 512 Elementary (grades 4-5)
  - 813 Middle (grades 6-8)
  - 1135 High (grades 9-12)
Measures: Civic Engagement

**Social Responsibility Values** “It’s important to consider the needs of others.”
4 items, \(\alpha = .69\); 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely)

**Informal Helping** “I helped a neighbor for no pay.”
6 items, \(\alpha = .73\), 1 (never) to 5 (very often)

**Political Beliefs** “People should keep up with current events.”
2 items, \(\alpha = .62\); 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

**Environmental Behavior** “I limit how much paper I use.”
3 items, \(\alpha = .71\); 1 (never) to 5 (very often)

**Civic Skills** “Create a plan to address a problem.”
6 items, \(\alpha = .88\); 1 (I definitely can’t) to 5 (I definitely can)

**Voting Intentions**
1 item; 1 (I wouldn’t do this) to 5 (I will or have already done this)

**Volunteering**
1 item; 1 (0 hours) to 6 (5+ hours)
Measures: Competencies

**Emotional Regulation** (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007)

“I have control over my feelings”
3 items, \( \alpha = .60 \)

**Empathy** (Bekkers, 2005)

“When I see another person who is upset, I feel upset too”
4 items, \( \alpha = .73 \)

**Future-mindedness** (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

“When I make a decision, I consider the impact it will have on my future”
3 items, \( \alpha = .73 \)
Measures: Competencies

Prosocial Moral Reasoning

Vignette describing protagonist facing social/moral dilemma (based on Carlo et al. 2008; Metzger & Ferris, 2013)

Judgments about the central character:

Obligation: *How wrong would it be for Pat to...*

Social praiseworthiness: *How much respect would you have for Pat...*
Overall model

- Emotional Regulation
- Empathy
- Prosocial Moral Reasoning
- Future-mindedness
- Social Responsibility Values
- Informal Helping
- Political Beliefs
- Civic Skills
- Environmental Behaviors
- Voting
- Volunteering
Project Design and Analytic Plan

• Planned missing (3-form) design

• Structural equation modeling using Mplus 7.11
  – FIML with principle components as auxiliary variables to handle missing data (Little et al., 2008)
  – MLR to account for school clustering

Multi-group model: three age groups

• Measurement model
  – Measurement invariance

• Structural invariance
  – Comparing constrained vs. unconstrained models
  – CFI difference > .01 (Little, 2008)
  – Significant path differences across age groups
Overall model

Emotional Regulation
Empathy
Prosocial Moral Reasoning
Future-mindedness

Social Responsibility Values
Informal Helping
Political Beliefs
Civic Skills
Environmental Behaviors
Voting
Volunteering

CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .026 (.024 - .027)
Age-groups model

Emotional Regulation

Empathy

Prosocial Moral Reasoning

Future-mindedness

Informal Helping

Social Responsibility Values

Political Beliefs

Civic Skills

Environmental Behaviors

Voting

Volunteering

Elementary and High School
Age-groups model

Emotional Regulation

Empathy

Prosocial Moral Reasoning

Future-mindedness

Social Responsibility Values

Informal Helping

Political Beliefs

Civic Skills

Environmental Behaviors

Voting

Volunteering

All age groups
Age-groups model

- Emotional Regulation
- Empathy
- Prosocial Moral Reasoning
- Future-mindedness
- Social Responsibility Values
- Informal Helping
- Political Beliefs
- Civic Skills
- Environmental Behaviors
- Voting
- Volunteering

Middle and High school
Age-groups model

- Emotional Regulation
- Empathy
- Prosocial Moral Reasoning
- Future-mindedness
- Social Responsibility Values
- Informal Helping
- Political Beliefs
- Civic Skills
- Environmental Behaviors
- Voting
- Volunteering

Middle and High school
Age-groups model

- Emotional Regulation
- Empathy
- Prosocial Moral Reasoning
- Future-mindedness
- Social Responsibility Values
- Informal Helping
- Political Beliefs
- Civic Skills
- Environmental Behaviors
- Voting
- Volunteering

High school ONLY
Age-groups model

- Emotional Regulation
- Empathy
- Prosocial Moral Reasoning
- Future-mindedness
- Social Responsibility Values
- Informal Helping
- Political Beliefs
- Civic Skills
- Environmental Behaviors
- Voting
- Volunteering

Middle and High school
Age-groups model

- Emotional Regulation
- Empathy
- Prosocial Moral Reasoning
- Future-mindedness
- Social Responsibility Values
- Informal Helping
- Political Beliefs
- Civic Skills
- Environmental Behaviors
- Voting
- Volunteering

Middle school ONLY
Age-groups model

- Emotional Regulation
- Empathy
- Prosocial Moral Reasoning
- Future-mindedness
- Social Responsibility Values
- Informal Helping
- Political Beliefs
- Civic Skills
- Environmental Behaviors
- Voting
- Volunteering

High school ONLY
Brief Discussion

• Links between core emotional, cognitive, and social-cognitive competencies varied by age
  – Younger youth: emotion regulation
  – With increasing age: empathy
  – Oldest youth: prosocial moral reasoning and future-mindedness

• Associations varied by category of civic involvement
Limitations and future directions

• Design
  – Longitudinal analyses
  – Variations by race/ethnicity, SES, geographic location

• Social support and ecological assets

• The “good to good” problem...
  – Consider alternative pathways to civic participation
Acknowledgements
www.civicroots.org

Research Team
Lauren Alvis
Elizabeth Yale Babskie
Celina Benavides
Ariel Carpenter
Sarah Culbertson
Kaitlyn Ferris
Susan Mangan
Rebecca Olson
Benjamin Oosterhoff
Brian Riches
Katelyn Romm
Wendy Rote
Maura Shramko
Jennifer Shubert
Michael Warren
Jennifer Williams

Grant Funding
JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION
SUPPORTING SCIENCE—INVESTING IN THE BIG QUESTIONS

School Districts and Participating Schools

Search Institute