

Appendix A:

Concepts and Terms Related to Civic and Political Engagement

This appendix lists the definitions and concepts of civic and political engagement that are most relevant to this policy book. The coverage here is not intended to be comprehensive, and there are other conceptualizations that are appropriate in a different context. A starting point is situating engagement within society.

Modern societies are organized between three sectors: the market, the state, and civil society. These sectors, and the institutions within them, can operate independently or interact with one other. The market is the site of production of goods and services, where private institutions undertake economic activities that are motivated by profit. The norms and values of the market, such as utility maximization and consumer autonomy, stress the role of the individual and therefore undermine activities that focus on collective outcomes. The state is a set of governing institutions with a formal structure, where political decisions take the form of laws, rules, and regulations. Within this setting, public institutions deliver public goods and services. The state typically regulates the market, to address market failure or equity concerns, though some believe that the state over-regulates the market and therefore limits its efficiency. The concept of political economy, based on the relationship between the market and the state, explores the overlap between these sectors. Within a capitalist or socialist society, the political economy is a particularly large configuration.

Civil society includes institutions and organizations that fall outside of the market, the state, and the family (Carnegie UK Trust, London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society, and UCLA Center for Civil Society, nd). However, civil society increasingly overlaps or interacts with these other sectors, blurring the boundaries between them (*Ibid*). Thus, civil society is defined in many different ways. We characterize civil society as being comprised of voluntary organiza-

tions and institutions that serve a collective good, including groups such as nonprofit organizations, professional associations, and labor unions (*Ibid*). In part, civil society addresses normative notions about how the market and the state should function, and attempts to make up for deficiencies. As the role of the state declines, the public sector increasingly depends upon civil society to help deliver public services.

Civic engagement is vast, nuanced, and, like civil society, can be defined in a multitude of ways. Civic engagement takes place within civil society or through interactions between civil society and other sectors, and can include both individual and collective action. Because the definition of civic engagement is subjective, we will be precise in our use of the term. In contrast to civics, the study of government and the role of citizen participation and input, civic engagement has two main components: voluntary action and the production of public goods.ⁱ

Volunteerism is central to the notion of civic engagement. If an activity is mandatory or prohibited, it is no longer civic engagement. As such, the state can greatly influence this engagement through laws, or a lack of laws, that govern individual interaction with the state. In order for an activity to fall within the scope of civic engagement, it must not be coerced but should happen voluntarily out of social responsibility or obligation (Carnegie UK Trust nd; London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society nd).

Volunteerism that contributes to public goods is, however, problematic because there are economic disincentives.ⁱⁱ By definition, public goods are goods (and services) that are non-exclusionary, that is, everyone benefits. The classical example is the security provided by a nation's armed forces. This creates a problem of free riders, which occurs because individuals benefit regardless of whether they pay for the production of the public good. One way of overcoming this problem is requiring compulsory contributions, and the government does this through taxes that are then used on public goods. There is no similar mechanism in civil society, so volunteerism entails a degree of noncompulsory sacrifice and altruism.

Political engagement is a subset of civic engagement that occurs through interaction between civil society and the state. It includes

voting, participating on neighborhood councils, and working with political parties. The state plays an important role in facilitating civic and political engagement through allowing, or prohibiting, activities such as voting. In the U.S., voting is voluntary rather than compulsory and produces the public good of an engaged citizenry. The American regime of civic engagement allows citizens to interact with the state through the electoral process. Historically, however, there have been significant barriers to voting in the U.S., particularly for immigrants and people of color. The shift from prohibiting to allowing voting is a relatively recent one, particularly for a large number of Asian immigrants.

Outside of political engagement, civic engagement activities do not necessarily involve interactions with the state. Civic engagement often comes about when civil society interacts with the nonprofit sector to address market externalities such as pollution.ⁱⁱⁱ Pollution clean-up campaigns encourage and facilitate volunteerism and result in a public good of lower levels of pollution. Civil society also interacts with the market to produce civic engagement. This is evident through citizen action to promote regulations that affect businesses, advocate for solutions to problems that concern the private sector, or distribute information, such as a list of reputable service providers. This serves to indirectly regulate the market for a particular service and reflects opinions about how the market ought to function and regulate itself.

Civic engagement is sometimes a precursor to social capital, the connections within and between social networks (Putnam 2000). Robert Putnam famously charted the decline of American social capital through waning participation in civic groups such as labor unions and bowling clubs. In following up to his work, economists have found that civic engagement declines as communities become more heterogeneous (Costa and Kahn 2003). While the definition of community is limited by the data being used, this finding generates some important questions about civic engagement for a group as diverse as the Asian American community (*Ibid*). Because civic engagement produces social capital through relationships and networks, lower engagement rates ultimately lead to lower levels of social capital. At the same time, the level of civic engagement is simultaneously influenced by the amount and nature of social capital. When a society undergoes

a demographic change, such as that associated with immigration, the networks across ethnic groups (bridging social capital) are initially weak. One way to build those networks is through encouraging civic engagement that transcends ethnic divides.

Institutions play an important role in facilitating, hindering and shaping civic engagement. The market, state, and civil society are largely organized through institutions, and an institution is defined as a set of shared norms and values that govern behavior (Carnegie UK Trust nd; London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society nd). Institutions such as labor unions, churches, and families can also interact with civil society to influence individual behavior both within and beyond an institution. Ethnicity and culture, though not thought of as formal institutions, clearly have a set of shared norms and values and therefore also fall into this category.

An institution may or may not be a site of civic engagement and, when it is, the degree of civic engagement may vary. The more that an institution is closed off, by distinguishing between members and non-members, the less it can be an arena for civic engagement because it is unlikely to produce a public good. In this case, the benefits of an activity are concentrated and bestowed upon the institution's members. Institutions with porous barriers between members and nonmembers yield more diffuse benefits and therefore are much more likely to fall within the arena of civil society. Business district associations that address problems of their district members are an example of a group with concentrated benefits. In contrast, the Lions Club may draw members from the business community but the benefits of their activities, often community-wide service projects, are more diffuse. The League of Conservation Voters creates very diffuse benefits through a focus on broader civic engagement.

Of course, not all actions within an institution can be classified as civic or political engagement. Country clubs are a prime example, since most, if not all, activities do not produce a public good. Labor unions and religious institutions also engage in activities that include, but are not limited to, civic and political engagement. For example, religious institutions have a spiritual aspect that falls outside of the realm of engagement.

Despite declining membership, labor unions continue to play an

important role in promoting and facilitating civic and political engagement at the institutional level. They are organized in a way to encourage public service, set up volunteer opportunities, and promote political participation. This can take the form of nonpartisan encouragement to vote or partisan influence to vote for a particular candidate or issue position. When unions engage in partisan activity, they tend to align with the Democratic Party. Critics of unions assert that they are too focused on group interests, sometimes at the expense of the individual.

Religious group membership is perhaps the most common group affiliation in the U.S. Religious groups often have nonprofit legal status granted by the state. Similar to other types of membership groups, religious groups foster a sense of group belonging and establish norms that dictate compulsory behaviors associated with group membership. The act of bringing people together produces a good that may or may not exclusively benefit members, depending on the intent of the institution and whether or not the good is excludable. By internalizing the benefits of membership, religious institutions, like other membership groups, can prevent free riders and encourage membership. On the other hand, religious institutions may decide or be mandated to encourage civic and political engagement through activities with diffuse benefits. These benefits, real or perceived, may accrue to the religious institution's members or society at large.

Finally, family is another important social institution and refers to a group of people that share a genetic, emotional, and/or co-habitational relationship. Family units may, but do not necessarily, serve a reproductive function through child bearing and rearing. Similar to unions and religious groups, the institution of family can interact with civil society to influence an individual's civic and political engagement activities.

Notes

- ⁱ By definition, public goods are subject to free riders. The free rider problem, which occurs when individuals lack the incentive to pay for their consumption of a good, has two components. First, free riders reap the benefits of a public good but do not contribute anything in return. Second, free riding can create a spillover effect that discourages others from paying for their consumption, thereby creating more free riders. If membership is excludable, a group can avoid the problem of free riders and their spillover effects.
- ⁱⁱ See for example, Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Nonprofit organizations are economic units legally defined and recognized by the state. Often times, nonprofit legal status allows an organization to accept tax-deductible contributions from private and public institutions. Nonprofits exist to fulfill a mission in the private or public interest and, in contrast to private institutions, nonprofits do not earn accounting profit.