

The Impact of AmeriCorps on Voting

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The relationship between AmeriCorps and political engagement has been controversial. Some conservative critics have argued that the program could encourage young people to take political action in favor of liberal causes or Democratic candidates. For example, in opposing the Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009, which authorized the expansion of AmeriCorps, Rep. Michelle Bachmann (R-MN) said the bill would mean “re-education camps for young people, where young people have to go and get trained in a philosophy that the government puts forward and then they have to go to work in some of these politically correct forums.”² But other critics have worried that AmeriCorps, which promotes volunteering and has strict rules against political activity, may divert young people toward uncontroversial service and away from electoral politics.³

For this study, we have analyzed data from a nationally representative longitudinal study of 1,752 people who were first-time, full-time members in the AmeriCorps State and National

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² Chris Steller, *Minnesota Independent*, April 6, 2009 (<http://minnesotaindependent.com/31237/bachmann-reeducation-camps>)

³ E.g., Tobi Walker, “The Service/Politics Split: Rethinking Service to Teach Political Engagement,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 33, No. 3. (2000), pp. 646-649; and Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, “Citizenship Without Politics? A Critique of Pure Service,” *National Civic Review*, vol. 92, Issue 4 (2003), pp. 14–20: “The ban on political activity within AmeriCorps was understandable as a means of ensuring congressional support, but it has had the effect of denigrating politics altogether”

program and who enrolled between September 1999 and January 2000. A comparison group of 1,524 people was selected from individuals who indicated interest in AmeriCorps by contacting the Corporation for National and Community Service's AmeriCorps toll-free information line but did not enroll in the program. In both groups, participants were surveyed at baseline and then one year, four years, and eight years after the baseline.

We find that the young people who enrolled in AmeriCorps were substantially less likely to have voted in the most recent election than their peers in the comparison group. That cannot be a *result* of AmeriCorps, because the election had occurred before they enrolled. Our analysis indicated that the AmeriCorps sample was, on average, more disadvantaged than the comparison group. For example, Corps members had completed fewer years of education and their families of origin had lower levels of income than the comparison group. Disadvantaged groups tend to have lower voting rates which may partially explain the difference between AmeriCorps and comparison group members. However AmeriCorps ultimately boosts the odds that its alumni will engage in a wide array of civic activities. Specifically, enrolling in AmeriCorps has a statistically significant, positive effect on the odds that a member who is active mainly as a voter when entering the program will become more broadly active in community affairs eight years later, i.e., they will volunteer, attend community events, become informed about civic issues, vote, and join and work with local organizations to improve life in their communities.

Overall, the study shows that young adults tend to become more civically engaged during the years between ages 19 and 29 – regardless of whether they served in AmeriCorps or not. That change probably reflects maturation over an eight-year period in which many individuals also complete their educations, begin careers, and start their own families. Young adults who are “inactive” early on (participating in few if any civic acts when they are first surveyed) are likely to become active, at least as voters, when they are re-surveyed eight years later. This progress is not uniform but is affected, to a degree, by experiences in early adulthood. College education is by far the most powerful, positive influence on civic engagement, but AmeriCorps participation has one notable impact: increasing the odds that AmeriCorps members who only vote when they enter the program will be broadly engaged in civic work in their communities eight years later.

Thus there is no evidence that AmeriCorps mobilizes people politically. On the contrary, the odds that a person voted in the previous election are much lower if he or she was enrolled in AmeriCorps. There is equally little evidence that AmeriCorps channels engagement away from politics. In fact, AmeriCorps has no independent effect (positive or negative) on the chances that disengaged youth will start voting, but it substantially broadens the civic engagement of those who do vote.

The longitudinal survey asked about several forms of civic engagement:

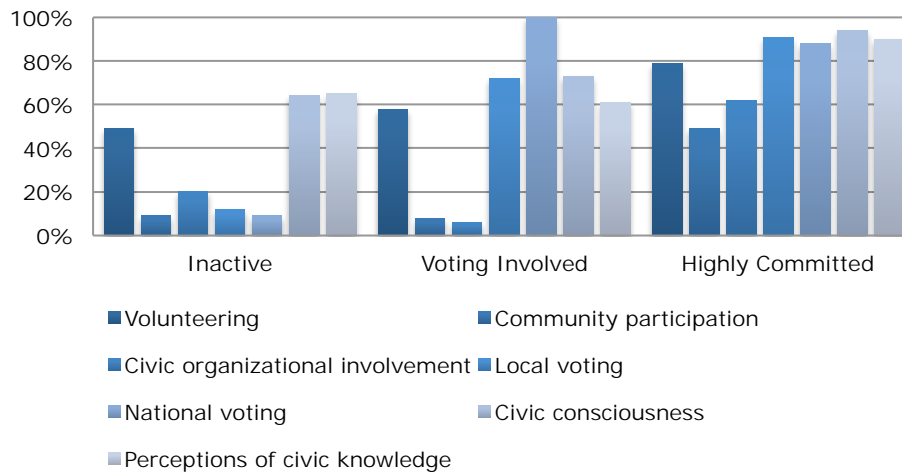
- Volunteering in the previous 12 months
- Community participation in events such as meetings, celebrations, or activities in their community.

- Civic organizational involvement measured: how often respondents joined organizations that supported issues that were important to them.
- Local voting behavior assessed how often respondents voted in local elections.
- National voting behavior measured voting in the 1998 and 2004 presidential elections
- Civic consciousness: how strongly respondents agreed with the following statement: “I often think about how larger political and social issues affect my community.”
- Perceptions of civic knowledge: five questions about how much respondents felt they knew about the environment, public health issues, literacy, crime, and lack of civic involvement in their communities.

In order to simplify the analysis and clarify the results, we used a standard technique called “Latent Transition Analysis” (LTA) to divide the whole sample (both the AmeriCorps and Comparisons) into three groups. This is a more sophisticated technique than assigning people to categories according to rules or criteria. For instance, one might categorize young adults as voters or non-voters, based on their answers to a question about voting, and that would be an example of using a criterion to assign them to groups. LTA instead identifies underlying factors that are not directly measured by any particular survey question or reflected in any particular behavior but rather identifies groups based on how individuals combine behaviors. This method yielded the following three groups based on how they combined the civic items in the survey:

- The Inactives: 39% of the whole sample at baseline. Some volunteered, said they thought about issues, and said they knew about public issues, but their other forms of civic engagement were strikingly low.
- The Voting Involved: 29% of the sample at baseline. They were marked by very high turnout (100% in a national election) but low community participation and low civic organizational involvement.
- The Highly Committed: 32% of the sample at baseline. They scored high on all measures.

Figure 1: Group Behaviors by Participation Types



Over the course of the eight-year study, individuals tended to move from the Inactive status to the other two groups. Most (69%) of the Inactives became Voting Involved. Just 24% of them stayed Inactive, and just 6% became Highly Committed. Of the Voting Involved, almost all (93%) remained in the same status. Just a few (3%) became Inactive or (4%) shifted to the Highly Committed status. This pattern reinforces Plutzer’s finding that voting is habitual: few voters become non-voters.⁴ As for the Highly Committed, half of them (50%) were able to sustain that status, but almost half (49%) became Voting Involved instead. (That change reflects some fall-off in their levels of community participation.) Just 2% of the Highly Committed became Inactive.

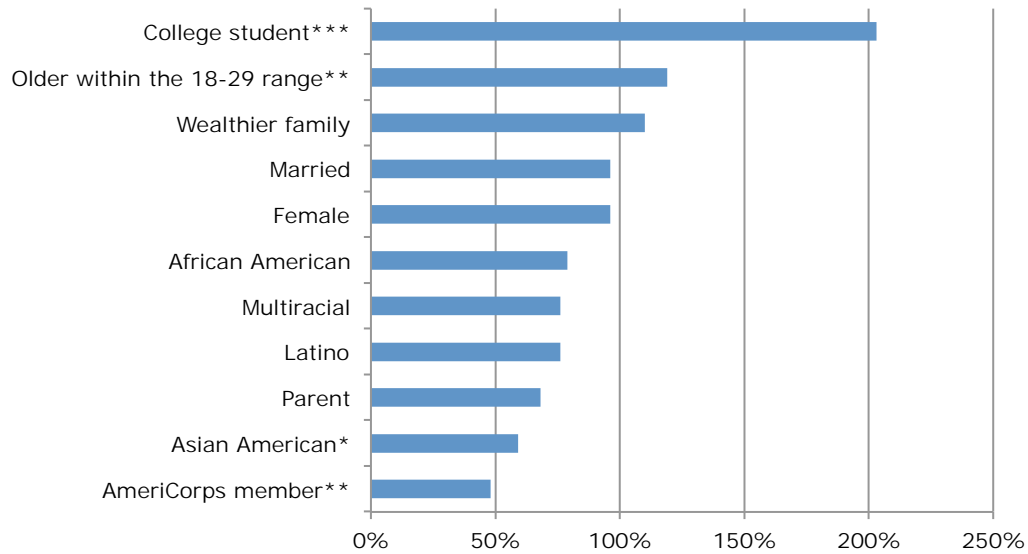
Thus the pattern is generally one of growth in civic engagement, although young adults may have trouble sustaining the highest level of commitment over an eight-year period. The fall-off in levels of civic participation may be due to the competing demands of work and family life over this period but, as Plutzer suggests, they do not quit voting when they take on such roles.

At the baseline or beginning of the study, the odds that a young person is Inactive, Voting Involved, or Highly Committed is affected to a significant extent by educational attainment. Graph 2 shows the odds ratios for being active in Voting. The graph should be read as follows: compared to the whole sample, someone who is a college student is 203% (more than twice) as likely to be Voting Active. The graph shows that being older or a college

⁴ Plutzer, E. (2002). Becoming a habitual voter: Inertia, resources, and growth in young adulthood. *American Political Science Review*, 96, 41-56.

student boosts the odds of being Voting Active. Enrolling in AmeriCorps is associated with much lower odds (48%) of being Voting Active. The most recent election had taken place a year before the survey, so this result does not indicate that AmeriCorps suppresses voting. More likely, people who enroll in AmeriCorps are less engaged in partisan politics than people who inquire about AmeriCorps but do not enroll. This gap could reflect differences in motivations and priorities or socioeconomic disadvantages of AmeriCorps participants that were not measured in the survey.

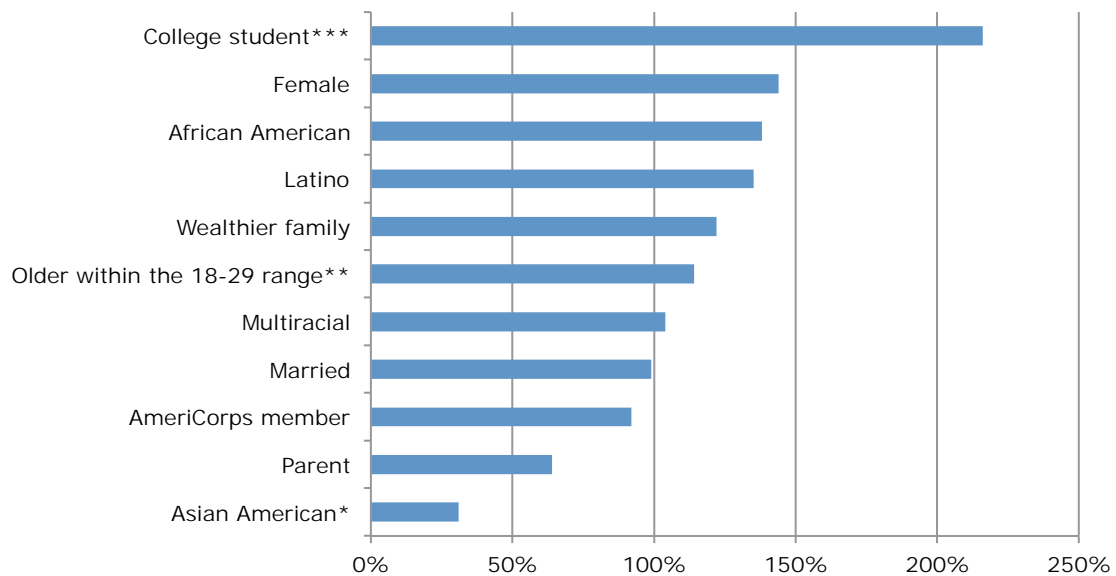
Figure 2: Odds of Being Voting Active at Wave 1 Compared to the Whole Sample



Asterisks denote statistically significant results. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The pattern is similar for the Highly Committed status. Again, having college experience and growing older boost one's odds of being civically engaged. Being Asian-American lowers those odds.

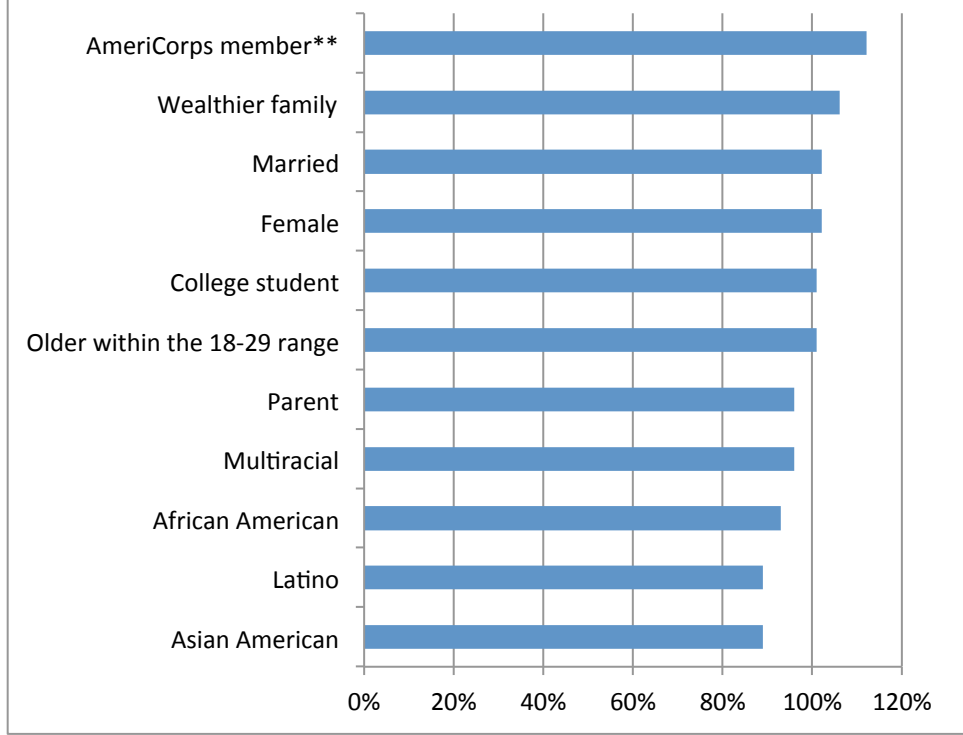
Figure 3: Odds of Being Highly Committed at Wave 1 Compared to the Whole Sample



Asterisks denote statistically significant results. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The Wave 1 survey results shown in Graphs 2-3 are essentially measures of young adults' behavior *before* AmeriCorps could affect them. This longitudinal survey also allows us to look at changes over an eight year period. Since our focus is on AmeriCorps, we begin by noting that we find only one significant relationship between AmeriCorps membership and civic development. As shown in Figure 4, participating in AmeriCorps is associated with substantially higher odds that an individual will change from being Voting Involved on entering the program to being Highly Committed eight years later. AmeriCorps membership is the only factor measured in the survey that has an impact on that transition. The group that is Voting Involved and enrolls in AmeriCorps is relatively small, because the program seems to draw more apolitical youth, but those who do fall into this group have higher odds of becoming Highly Committed.

Figure 4: Odds of Making a Transition from Voting Involved to Highly Committed



Asterisks denote statistically significant results. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

In sum, the debate over the political impact of AmeriCorps seems largely misplaced. This is neither a program that makes people political activists nor a diversion from voting and politics. Rather, it attracts a relatively apolitical group, has no effects on their odds of becoming Voting Active, but does broaden the civic engagement of the relatively small group of AmeriCorps members who enter in the Voting Involved group.