

Introduction:

Bringing Civic Engagement into Sharper Focus

By Nancy Morrow-Howell and Marc Freedman, guest editors

Gerontology theorists have long considered engagement in activities as a key factor in the experience of older adults. From activity theory (Havighurst, 1963) to the successful-aging model of Rowe and Kahn (1998), gerontologists have been strongly attracted to the idea that active engagement in society is related to well-being in later life. They have extolled various types of activities—social, productive, religious, educational, intergenerational. Today, as the demographic, economic, and social realities of our world change in ways that are often unsettling, another type of engagement is gaining attention—civic engagement. The confluence of increasingly complex social problems, and the burgeoning numbers of people who can expect to live twenty to thirty years past retirement, call us to consider the possibilities of a civically engaged older population. Older adults vitally engaged in activities aimed at the social good—this win-win scenario has captured the imagination of many gerontologists.

Today the term *civic engagement* is widely used by people in many different realms—politicians, funders, program developers, business leaders,

*A call for bold steps...
and some questions.*

entrepreneurs, educators, and nonprofit executives. The national organizations in aging, the American Society on Aging, National Council on Aging, and the Gerontological

Society of America, all have projects on civic engagement. Charitable foundations and others who underwrite projects, research, and programs in aging are supporting civic engagement initiatives; and the topic was high profile at the 2005 White House Conference on Aging. With all this attention, now is the time to step back and bring our thoughts about civic engagement and the aging population into sharper focus, to engage in a discussion that has the potential to shape the “civic engagement movement” (Adler and Goggin, 2005) for millions of aging adults.

As guest editors, we hope that this issue of *Generations* will take us in that direction. We have brought together people who have thought a lot about civic engagement in later life—advocates, critics, researchers, administrators, and program developers. We have tried to present a range of ideas that reflects the breadth of the topic itself. Two of this issue’s authors, McBride and Henkin, provide the definition that we find

most helpful: Quoting Christiano (1996), they write that “civic engagement” refers to citizen action that has public consequence for our communities and the polity. Two spheres of behaviors are included: political and social. “Political engagement” refers to those behaviors that influence governmental processes at the local, state, and national levels. “Social engagement” refers to actions that connect individuals to others and that relate to care or development (Wuthnow, 1991). In both spheres, these actions are usually voluntary and include mutual aid, volunteerism, and civic service.

Achenbaum gives us the historical perspective from which to consider the current scene. We review the mainstream civic engagement activities of volunteering (Rozario), service (Morrow-Howell), mutual aid (Carlton-LaNey), and political involvement (Binstock). And we break out of more traditional definitions of civic engagement by including a burgeoning new arena that brings together older adults, civic engagement, and paid employment. Anticipating the needs and desires of the baby boomer generation—for paying jobs and a sense of purpose—Freedman paints a career-focused picture of civic engagement for older adults.

We review the most current initiatives in civic engagement. Cullinane provides an overview of the national initiatives of gerontological associations, and we present the award-winning programs selected by NCOA. Further, Endres distills the lessons learned from programs across the country to guide best practices in civic engagement of older adults. Also, O’Neill presents his perspectives on civic engagement as addressed at the 2005 White House Conference on Aging.

Hinterlong reviews the current knowledge about the multiple positive outcomes associated with civic engagement. Armed with theoretical and empirical arguments, we push for employers (Gonyea and Goggins), educational institutions (Wilson), and geographic communities (Henkin) to recognize their roles in capturing the resources of the aging population. And there is attention to the role of public policy: scholars, including Gomperts, reflect on the policy changes that need to occur to engage more older adults in meaningful civic work.

As we clarify our thinking, Hudson and Martinson challenge the what’s-not-to-like attitude about civic engagement. They remind us of the political agendas to be played out. They question whether agreement about the meaning of later life should so easily be taken for granted. McBride considers the problem of exclusion of older adults who have historically been marginalized.

As guest editors, we have brought together these contributions because we believe that they reflect the best of what could be called the second generation of ideas regarding civic engagement in later life. The first generation of ideas was about advocacy, about convincing the public that an aging society presented untapped assets and opportunities. Akin to the discussions about productive aging and successful aging, wherein meaningful engagement took center stage, civic engagement was seen as an antidote to the preoccupation with older age as a time for full-time leisure, marginalization, taking and not giving. Aging advocates wrote of the growing number of older adults, fit and functioning, who were looking for ways to continue contributing to family and community, and the advocates wrote of the antiquated social structures that limited the active participation of older adults. Fortunately, today we no longer need to advocate full time for the recognition of the potential of an aging society. There is more agreement that the aging population represents “a windfall of human resources” (Freedman, 1999) that should not be squandered.

But the stakes are higher for the second generation of writings on civic engagement and older adults. The second generation is more critical. All good ideas have their downsides. Today, we are quicker to flag potential pitfalls. We are more thoughtful about how to develop programs and policies to avoid any harm that may come to individual older adults who don’t fit the civic engagement mold. We are more careful about notions that older volunteers can take up slack in our social programs.

The second generation of writings is more analytic. Researchers ask questions about levels and types of civic involvement and correlates. We call for an increased knowledge base about what works to attract and support older adults

in civic roles. We strive for evidence about costs and outcomes. We also think that the second generation of writing indicates that the focus on institutions has settled in quite solidly—the perspective that maximizing the opportunities of our aging society will come from change in social institutions, not from change in individuals. The institutions where we educate our citizens and provide them with employment have big roles to play in the civic lives of older adults. Social policies will shape attitudes and programs about civic roles. As this issue of *Generations* shows, the knowledge base on civic engagement of older adults is starting to be established.

—N. M.H.

But while we're researching and writing and searching for answers, our world is changing faster than you can say "civic engagement." The first of approximately 77 million baby boomers have already passed into their 60s, and many who are already over 60 are laying critical groundwork for massive change in the expectations and economics of an aging society. Just a few years ago, for example, most people viewed later life as a time to leave the workforce. Today, surveys show that three out of four baby boomers expect work to be a significant part of their lives well beyond traditional retirement age. In fact, some out in front are calling for an end to the use of the word *retirement* altogether. It could be that just as we achieve the new perspectives, policies, and programs reflected in this volume, we will have won the last war, but we will be facing the next one unprepared.

What will the next generation of analysis and innovation look like—and will it come in time? It seems clear that the third generation of ideas will be defined by baby boomers, who will search, as they have in so many areas, for something entirely new and entirely their own, that fits their particular circumstances. We will need to hurry to keep up. We will need to see things in real time.

Our world today has big and urgent problems, making civic engagement not just a kindly impulse to keep older adults healthy and engaged, but a call to all able bodies who can help solve our greatest challenges—illiteracy,

poverty, illness, terrorism, environmental degradation. Right now, we have the opportunity to match the largest, healthiest, best educated older population in the history of the world with the human needs that are also growing to historic proportions. But this matchup, however logical, won't happen easily or automatically. We will need to think differently about the new stage of life between the end of midlife careers and the beginning of what the British call "the fourth age," about breakthrough institutions, and creative policies. We won't be able to tinker at the margins and expect things to simply fall into place.

Instead, we must take bold new steps to transform later life in society—steps as bold in our time as Medicare and Social Security were at their inception. These steps may not fit neatly into the field labeled "aging;" in fact, we think they won't. They will involve rethinking education and training, even recasting family life, as we spread the joys and responsibilities of engagement throughout the new lifespan. They will involve reorganizing and rethinking work—both paid and unpaid. Senior volunteering, mature workers, and lifelong learning—as phrases and concepts—may teeter on the brink of obsolescence.

These steps won't be optional—they will be required for our society to function equitably and efficiently in the face of new demographics, and they will be critical to upholding and improving the quality of life in our homes and communities.

The key question used to be, How do we keep the old folks busy? But we end by presenting a new question to lead us to the next generation of thinking about civic engagement: How can the largest, best educated cohort of older Americans confront the urgent problems that threaten the world's well-being?

Only our biggest thinking and most audacious bets will lead to the changes we seek, the changes we need. ☪

—M.F.

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