

## **Sage Leadership/Setting the Stage IV: The Rise of Civic Engagement**

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*“The new role of the sage leader is to walk the planet as a person of inner harmony who is civically engaged in his or her community.”* That is the subject of this project on Theory S.

### **Background**

Civic engagement builds on traditions going back to ancient Greece. There the concept was *arête*, roughly translated as “civic virtue,” which prescribed duties of citizenship. The idea of civic virtue weaved its way in political philosophy across the millennia and became a fundamental part of our founding fathers’ ideology. They concluded that civic virtue was critical to the functioning of a republican government and believed that if specific habits were not nurtured—civility, open-mindedness, compromise, toleration of diversity—the new American Republic might follow previous societies and fall under the sword of authoritarianism. Their emphasis, then, was on helping others for the common good, what Alexis de Tocqueville later called “habits of the heart,” the nurturing of democratic principles and values that manifest themselves in the everyday lives of citizens (Endnote 1).

It was also de Tocqueville who declared in *Democracy in America* (1836) that the American people surpassed all others in their appetite for creating voluntary associations to accomplish pragmatic, idealistic, public goals. Were Tocqueville alive today, even he might be amazed at the magnitude of what has transpired since his time—though as Robert Bellah and his colleagues have noted in their 1985 update of the de Tocqueville analysis, these voluntary associations are often found locked within very focused “life style enclaves. (Endnote 2) Nevertheless, whether dedicated to the betterment of an entire society or a focused enclave, voluntary organizations continue to tap the wisdom, experience, and dedication of Americans of all ages, across all areas of national life (Endnote 3). It is principally through voluntary organizations that people become

civically engaged and understand the ties they have to their community and the responsibilities they have within it.

### **Definitions and Meaning**

Civic engagement today has several meanings. One is “*Working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make a difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and nonpolitical processes*” (Endnote 4). Another meaning is: “*Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. It...can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem, or interact with the institutions of representative democracy*” (Endnote 5). Given these meanings, there is good reason for having civic engagement include the rise of the *encore career*, where baby boomers and others are securing second, social purpose–driven careers that provide them with both means and meaning (Endnote 6).

Both of the definitions play-out in a wide array of civic organizations. Usually included as vehicles for civic engagement are nonprofit organizations, government and political organizations, educational organizations, social services organizations, media organizations, faith-based organizations, arts organizations, fraternal and service clubs, and environmental organizations.

### **Civic Indicators**

Civic engagement can be better understood by eleven key indicators of civic health that have been identified. They include connecting to civic and religious groups; trusting other people; joining with family and friends for public purpose; engaging in citizen-centered activities to discuss issues and work voluntarily to address them; charitable giving and volunteering; staying informed; understanding civics and politics; participating in politics; being connected to major institutions; stating political views; and sharing opinions about political, social, or community issues. These indicators are in flux today because most Americans are found to be reducing their civic engagement and turning inward under the stress of the current economic crisis. (Endnote 7)

But this has happened before in US history and is likely to change again as the economy recovers. (Endnote 8)

### **Theory S: Civic Engagement and Saging**

Perhaps no one had more to do with making the connection between civic engagement and saging than the late John Gardner, founder of Common Cause and Independent Sector; Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare; President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; and adviser to US presidents. More than two decades ago Gardner wrote a provocative concept paper that led to the creation of Civic Ventures. In it he set the stage for today's civic engagement of sage leaders:

*It is no secret that conventional views of aging have tended to push older people aside, but it is partly our fault... We know the conventional view is that our society owes its older citizens something, and we would be foolish to quarrel with that. But we owe something too, and this is our 'operation give-back.' It isn't just altruism and a sense of duty, however. We have an active feeling of obligation to our society and our communities. We believe that this will be a great adventure—good for us physically and in every other way. If one lists the problems of older people, health would...top this list, with economic problems...second. After that, very high on the list is a cluster of problems: loneliness, boredom, and need to be needed (Endnote 9).*

Since Gardner's treatise in 1988 an enormous amount of research has connected late-life development with civic engagement. One pioneering effort was conducted at the University of Iowa in 2005. The purpose was to define civic engagement as a *retirement role* and to differentiate who met this role definition from other retirees. The research concluded that civic engagement can indeed be defined as a retirement role, for engaged retirees were found to differ significantly from those who volunteer less, work in non-civic roles, or do neither. Further, the study concluded that defining civic engagement as a retirement role should include not only volunteers but also individuals who return to paid work in organizations that pursue specific

civic purposes (Endnote 10). This reinforces the notion of many *encore careers* being included as a civic engagement activity.

So why do individuals at any age choose to become engaged in civic pursuits? Much has been written about the motives that people have for freely giving of their time and treasure. When it comes to *charitable giving*, motivations include altruism, the habit of giving, a coinciding of values, the desire to memorialize someone, a quest for immortality, fulfilling ego needs, community standing, being asked, default (having no one to whom assets would be left), fund raising involvement, and tax considerations (Endnote 11).

Motivations that people have for *volunteering* tend to fall into two categories. One is *altruism*, the desire to give back to society and serve the greater public good. The other is *self-interest*, simply doing what *we* want to do—a strong and straight-forward desire for structure, purpose, affiliation, growth, and meaning. Where the motivation is achievement, the goal is to be successful in situations that require excellent or improved performance. Where the motivation is affiliation, the goal is to engage with people who are enjoyed. Where the motivation is power, the goal is to have influence on situations or on others. Each of these motivations has a place in the world of civic engagement.

Perhaps the most significant research to date concerns the physical and mental health benefits of civic engagement, for thirteen major studies show significant connections. (Endnote 12) One, in Ontario, Canada, found that volunteering improves self-esteem and helps to reduce social isolation, lower blood pressure, and enhance the immune system. Another Canadian study revealed that older adults who volunteer actually experience a lower mortality rate, a result confirmed in a University of Michigan study that found men who volunteered at least once a week lived longer than men who didn't.

In the UK, benefits have included decreases in insomnia and speedier recovery from surgery. Similar studies in the US show increases in energy, more optimistic outlook, less depression and pain, better weight control, and a healthier cardiovascular system. Among the thirteen major studies seven have identified reduction in anxiety and depression. Six noted improved self-esteem; five identified lower mortality rates; three found improved immune systems; two

recognized better weight control, reduced blood pressure, and a speedier recovery time from surgery; and one identified increased mental functions as a health benefit of volunteering.

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## Endnotes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, 1836.
2. Robert Bellah and Others. *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985.
3. W. Andrew Achenbaum, *A History of Civic Engagement of Older People, Generations*, Volume XXX, Number 4, 2006-07.
4. Thomas Ehrlich, *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, 2000.
5. Michael Deli Carpini, *Civic Engagement*, The Pew Charitable Trust, APA Online, 2011.
6. Peter Hart, *Civic Ventures Encore Career Survey*, MetLife Foundation, 2008.
7. S. Keeter, *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, 2002.
8. *Economic News Release: Volunteering in the United States, 2010*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, 2011. [This is not to say that continuing effects of the recent recession should be passed over lightly. The unemployment rate surged to 10.2 percent in late October 2009, reaching double digits for the first time in 26 years and dropping only to 9.2% in 2011. This may well lead to the worst rate of joblessness since the Great Depression, an unbelievable catastrophe that is likely to take years to correct. And it is certain to impact the civic engagement of all age groups. Despite this painful reality, however, there is reassuring news when it comes to volunteering. Even with the recession, the national volunteer rate has remained relatively constant, from 26.2% in 2007 to 26.4% in 2008, and 26.3% in 2010. And in 2010, 62.8 million Americans volunteered 8.1 billion hours with a value of \$173 billion.]
9. *John Gardner's Vision*, Experience Corps, 1988.
10. Brian Kaskie, Sara Imhof, Joseph Cavanaugh, and Kenneth Culp, *Civic Engagement as a Retirement Role for Aging Americans*, The Gerontologist, 2008.
11. Gary H. Quehl, *Some Thoughts About Philanthropy and Fundraising*, unpublished paper, 2009.
12. Judy Looman, *Focusing on the Health Benefits of Volunteering as a Recruitment Strategy*, The International Journal of Volunteer Administration, Volume XXIV, Number 2, 2006.