



Why Transgender People Who Connect to One Another Are More Likely to Become Civically Engaged

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Election night 2017 was historic for the transgender community. By the end of the night, eight transgender candidates had been elected to public office across the country from California to Connecticut. Among those elected was Danica Roem, a 33-year old transgender woman and journalist, who became the first openly transgender person to be elected to a state legislature by defeating Bob Marshall, the 26-year incumbent and author of Virginia's failed anti-transgender "bathroom bill." Over the course of the following year, at least 40 transgender candidates ran for public office including Christine Hallquist of Vermont, the first transgender nominee for governor from a major party.

As transgender activist and writer Raquel Willis explains, the United States has entered "the age of trans political power" and transgender people across the country know it. Riding the wave of transgender political victories at the ballot box, the National Center for Transgender Equality Action Fund launched its TRANSform the Vote campaign to mobilize transgender citizens to get out the vote.

Engagement in political and civic life is the cornerstone of democracy, and political scientists have spent decades researching what makes people engage or disengage. Previous research shows that several factors make citizens less likely to participate in politics, many related to individuals' social and economic statuses. For example, research shows that people with lower incomes and less education are less engaged in civic life.

According to the [2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey](#) and [2015 U.S. Transgender Survey](#), transgender people are far more likely to have lower incomes and less education than their non-transgender counterparts. These surveys also show that transgender people of color face far more social and economic disadvantages than white transgender people. Taken together, these facts might seem to indicate that transgender people would be less civically engaged than non-transgender people. Strangely enough, however, the opposite is currently true. Transgender people are highly civically active in a variety of ways. In fact, according to the U.S. Transgender Survey, transgender Americans are more likely to vote than non-transgender Americans.

What Makes Transgender People Engage in Civic Life?

To understand what accounts for transgender citizens' levels of civic engagement, I conducted research using the U.S. Transgender Survey data, analyzing the influence of a number of variables on respondents' civic engagement. Conducted in the summer of 2015, the survey questioned almost 28,000 transgender people from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and several American territories. It is the largest study of the

transgender community conducted to date.

Certain results are entirely expected. Older and more educated transgender people tend to be more civically engaged. Additionally, the higher respondents' political self-efficacy – that is, the more they believed in their ability to influence government decisions – the more they participated in politics. But self-efficacy is not distributed evenly. Transgender women have lower self-efficacy than transgender men and nonbinary people, as do younger people and people with lower incomes. Less confident people, in turn, are less likely to be civically engaged. All of this fit with what previous research has shown about political participation.

Being connected to other members of one's community makes citizens more politically active – particularly among marginalized communities. For the transgender people surveyed, being connected to other transgender people was a major determinant of how civically engaged they were. What is more, this community connectedness – as I call it – was the single most important factor predicting engagement by transgender people, more important than their demographic, educational, and financial statuses alone or in combination.

Not only was community connectedness a direct contributor to participation in politics by transgender citizens. It influences civic engagement indirectly, as well, by increasing transgender citizens' sense of political efficacy. That is, community connectedness makes transgender citizens feel more empowered to influence the political system, encouraging them to be more active in political life.

The Power – and Limits – of Online Socialization

Having established that connection with other transgender people is an important indicator of civic engagement by transgender Americans, I wanted to know whether it mattered if the connections occur online or in-person. After all, [current best estimates](#) place transgender people at less than one percent of the total U.S. population, so there are fewer opportunities for in-person socialization than opportunities to connect online, where people can make friendly contact without living in the same neighborhood or even the same state.

I find that personal connections do indeed matter. Although civic engagement is encouraged when transgender people connect with one another either online or in-person, connecting in-person had almost twice the impact. Facebook friends, it seems, are good, but offline friends are better, when it comes to encouraging transgender people to become politically active.

Broader Implications

All in all, the results of my research suggest something important not only about the political participation of transgender citizens, but also about the participation of members of marginalized communities more broadly. Although the social, economic, and political disenfranchisement faced by marginalized people makes them understandably less inclined to engage in civic life, being connected to other members of their community can help them overcome barriers to participation. Community connectedness empowers citizens to take action and increases how much they participate. Political and civic participation, in turn, can lead to changes – on Election Day and every day.

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Read more in Thomas J Billard, "Together We Rise: The Role of Communication and Community Connectedness in Transgender Citizens' Civic Engagement in the United States," (forthcoming).