



How Do Effective Associations Spur Citizen Engagement?

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American democracy has always been more than a spectator sport. Throughout our history, activists have contacted officials, organized rallies, circulated petitions, and attended public hearings – challenging government and building movements to transform politics and policy. But activists rarely act alone. They work together and get many other citizens involved in the process. Often this happens through civic associations. Nearly four-fifths of politically active Americans, more than sixty million, say they are affiliated with some kind of association – ranging from the Sierra Club or a community group to MoveOn.org or a women’s association.

Today’s civic associations operate in the instant information era, with the potential to inspire participation quickly. Organizations that used to rely on phone calls and monthly mailings can now communicate electronically, encouraging activism through clicks. But clicks alone leave lots of civic potential unrealized. How can contemporary associations motivate more sustained activism?

Using surveys and experiments, I have compared associations that are especially good at engaging members and developing activists with those that do much less well. My results show that the most effective associations blend new technologies with time-tested organizing techniques, so they can both cast a broad net and pull members into deeper involvement.

The Ingredients of Civic Activism

When conventional wisdom looks beyond electronic technologies, it often presumes that factors such as charismatic leadership or clever messaging are the key to getting citizens involved. Or maybe it is just a matter of operating in a friendly context – a progressive group is bound to have an easier time activating people in San Francisco than in Montgomery, Alabama. Other observers claim that associations do not matter, because activism is a function of individual characteristics such as education, income, or coming from a politically involved family.

My research shows that associations do matter – and so do their organizing approaches. The most effective groups use new and old techniques to pursue a dual strategy: cast a wide net to reach the broadest possible pool of potential activists, and invest deeply in some members to draw them into greater involvement and develop their potential to become citizen leaders.

- **The Net: use modern technologies to reach as many people as possible.** Internet technologies allow civic associations to cast a broader and more intelligently targeted net than ever before – to identify large numbers of prospective new activists and leaders.

- **The Engine: use time-tested organizing strategies to develop activists.** The most effective groups transform names on a list into civic leaders and engage people in actions beyond the superficial. This cannot be done on the cheap; it requires careful relationship-building of the sort long practiced by U.S. associations. Relationship-building and leadership development amount to the engine that pulls participants up the ladder of activism.
- **The most effective associations function as both nets and engines.** They use online tools to discover a wide pool of prospects plus offline strategies to cultivate some of them to become more active. In my research, the less effective associations were those that invested more energy in building as broad a pool of “clicktivists” as possible, without engaging in the in-depth cultivation of individual activists.

Building Relationships to Cultivate Active Engagement

How do the most effective civic associations cultivate activism and civic leaders? They ask people to work with others, and do not shy away from asking people to move beyond simple actions. When today's associations offer tens or hundreds of thousands of people a chance to do something simple – usually online – that allows them to find prospective activists. Then they draw prospects into shared, demanding tasks, building social relationships each step of the way. Here are some effective tactics:

- **Reach out, especially to new members.** The civic associations marked by the highest levels of engagement actively welcome new people and give them a sense of the relationships that already exist amongst community members. An experimental study shows that new members who receive a special welcome message are more than twice as likely as those not welcomed to engage in further activities.
- **Provide opportunities for reflection.** Highly engaged civic associations help activists reflect on the meaning of their work. By asking participants to think about how their efforts help achieve desired political goals, associations can spark a sense of agency. Some associations orchestrate reflections as often as once a week. Reflections can be intense and time-consuming, but experimental research shows that even quick reflective conversations can boost activism.
- **Provide training opportunities.** Civic associations that ask a lot from members often support their efforts with training. Training sessions can equip active members with the skills they need to execute their tasks, and they are also a superb way to deepen relationships and more fully incorporate activists in the life and culture of the association.

Building Democratic Power from Civic Activism

Understanding how today's civic associations can best cultivate active citizen members and leaders willing to involve others in shared projects is crucial to the revitalization of American democracy. It is also the key to providing more political voice to all groups in our society. Many Americans believe that civic and political involvement is important, but these days fewer get actively involved than in the past. This can change, when civic associations use a combination of new and traditional organizing methods. Even associations that do not have the face-to-face local meetings once typical for U.S. civic groups can find ways to move beyond mere passive engagement to build relationships and train activists and leaders. The most effective civic associations are already closing the gap between intention and action with a potent combination of casting a wide net and building deeper relationships to fire up the engines of activism.