

Teach For America: Civic Engagement Magic Bullet?

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Teach for America (TFA) recruits and trains individuals to teach in low-income schools for two years. TFA estimates that 69% of its alumni work in education and 83% work in fields that impact education to low-income communities. Can TFA (and similar programs) help its participants develop higher levels of civic engagement? TFA teachers differ from other educators because they are most likely interested in educational equity. On one hand, we would expect to see high levels of engagement among TFA participants in careers related to this after their two-year commitment is over. On the other hand, individuals who participate in TFA are already interested in educational equity participation in TFA might not impact their civic engagement. Professor Jez reveals that TFA alumni, when compared to similar individuals, were not statistically more likely to be engaged in civic or political activity, work in pro-social careers, or hold politically idealistic views. TFA does, however, positively impact participants' unconscious racial tolerance, belief that poor children can compete with rich children, and the educational achievement gap is solvable.

Civic engagement is essential for a well-functioning democracy. Depending on the measure, civic engagement is either declining over time or has stagnated at depressingly low levels. One intervention that has been used to enhance civic engagement is post-baccalaureate programs that immerse individuals in public service work, such as Teach for America (TFA). TFA recruits and trains individuals to teach in low-income schools for two years. After their two-year commitment, TFA hopes that their experiences in the classroom will motivate them to stay engaged in education, but do they? Exposure to low-income students and their communities could develop the empathy and understanding that would motivate civic engagement. On the other hand, this exposure could also make participants more jaded and lead them to withdraw from civic life. One thing is clear: TFA teachers are different than non-TFA teachers. They likely enter the program with an interest in educational equity.

Key Findings:

- ◆ Past research demonstrates that participation in TFA does not lead to increased civic engagement.
- ◆ TFA alumni, when compared to similar individuals, were not significantly more likely to be engaged in civic or political activity, work in pro-social careers, or hold politically idealistic views.
- ◆ Participation in TFA does, however, increase participants' traits on civically important factors, such as unconscious racial tolerance, belief that poor children can compete with rich children, and that the educational achievement gap is solvable.

Comparison of Current Service Activities for Life Course Statuses by Type of Service

Type of Service Activity	Comparison Groups	Proportion Doing Service
Education-related service (sum of TFA & education-related)	Married ^a	.60
	Single	.58
	At least 1 child	.56
	No children	.59
	Full-time job	.58
	Part-time job ^b	.69*
Service in any area other than education	Married ^a	.43
	Single	.38
	At least 1 child	.43
	No children	.40
	Full-time job	.41
	Part-time job ^b	.44
Any kind of service (sum of TFA, education-related and other)	Married ^a	.74
	Single	.72
	At least 1 child	.69
	No children	.74
	Full-time job	.74
	Part-time job ^b	.79

N = 1,124

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001 (chi-square test)

Notes:

^aIncludes those in same and opposite sex domestic partnerships, as well as those who are married.

^bIncludes those who are unemployed as well as those with part-time jobs.

McAdam, D. and C. Brandt (2009). "Assessing the Effects of Voluntary Youth Service: The Case of Teach for America." *Social Forces* 88(2): 945-970.

Implications for Policy

Policy-makers interested in increasing civic engagement through the support of TFA and other similar programs should be wary. While the civic engagement of TFA alumni is high, it would have been high regardless of their participation in TFA – people who apply to TFA are simply more civically-minded than others. However, the findings demonstrate that participation in TFA did increase participants' traits on civically-important factors. TFA positively changes participant' racial and class tolerance and belief in the role of government in improving lives – overall, improving the quality of civic life. As such, policymakers must decide if the benefit of reducing prejudice and increasing faith in public institutions outweighs the costs of TFA and similar programs and whether investments should be made in programs that consistently demonstrate improvements in student learning.