

# Attachment to Community and Civic and Political Engagement: A Case Study of Students

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**Attachment to Community  
and Civic and Political Engagement: A Case Study of Students**

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*Abstract in English:*

Youth's low level of civic and political engagement may detrimentally affect the health of communities and the democratic system. This paper examines the role of community attachment in explaining youth's levels of civic and political engagement. This examination requires an evaluation of existing measures of community attachment and their relevance for understanding youth's experiences. The paper uses a student sample, highlighting a group of youth who have a degree of variation in their experiences of community attachment. We find that subjective measures of community attachment are related to volunteering and voting, but the objective measure of community attachment, i.e., years of residence, affects voting and not volunteering. Different mechanisms explain civic engagement versus political engagement. As such, different strategies are required to combat low levels of civic versus political engagement.

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*Introduction*

Youth's low level of civic and political engagement detrimentally affect the health of communities and the democratic system (Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Only 40% of Canadian youth voted in the last federal elections (Elections Canada, 2012). While secondary schools have successfully promoted volunteerism among teenagers, the effects are short-lived. There is an almost 20 percentage point drop in volunteerism after high school graduation (Hall et al., 2009; Pancer et al., 2007; Ravanera et al., 2003; Vezina & Crompton, 2012). While there are a variety of theories about why youth's volunteerism drops off after high school graduation, we are interested in the role of community attachment. The drop in volunteer rates coincides with a drop in community attachment (Ravanera et al., 2003). Before investigating this hypothesis, we need to re-think how we measure community attachment, because the current conceptualization and measurement is inappropriate for the study of youth's connection to their communities.

This paper is an important contribution, because it discusses the challenges that youth face in building and sustaining attachment to community. Furthermore, the paper uses a comprehensive measurement approach to community attachment. This study explores subjective or emotional bonds to community, as well as objective ties to community such as length of residence. This comprehensive approach reveals different mechanisms explaining civic and political engagement. These different mechanisms point to different strategies to address low levels of

engagement. Finally, this paper is an important contribution because there is little research on youth's community attachment and its implications on civic and political engagement.

### *Community Attachment and Youth*

Different studies have different ways of describing the phenomenon of community attachment. We view community attachment as the emotional and personal bonds that tie a person to the collective (Connerly & Marans, 1985; Unger & Wandersman, 1985). This broad definition encompasses feelings of belonging, sense of community, as well as measures of community embeddedness (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Goody, 1990; Ravanera et al., 2003; Ryan et al., 2005; Wilkinson, 2008). The definition also aligns with McLeod et al.'s (1996: 181) ideas about "community integration", which includes positive feelings toward the community, its institutions, and its problems (also see Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009; Paek, Yoon, & Shah, 2005). The common theme is an individual's connection to the community (see Ryan et al., 2005).

Community attachment has been measured in a variety of ways, but years of residence in a community is the most popular method of measurement (Goody, 1990; Jeffres et al., 1987; McCluskey et al., 2004; Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009; Kang & Kwak, 2003; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996; Ryan et al., 2005; Viswanath, Kosicki, Fredin, & Park, 2000). The premise of this research is that tenure in a community is expected to develop emotional or personal bonds to a collective (see literature review in Ryan et al., 2005). Years of residence may not work for understanding youth's community attachment. First, youth's length of residency does not have the same meaning for adults as it does for youth. Some youth reside in family households with higher mobility limiting the length of residence, but the decision to move is not their own. These youths

may be deeply connected to their community, but are forced to move with their parents. Finally, some youth are forced to move as part of the pursuit of employment or educational opportunities. They may have a strong community attachment, but they must move to get a job or to attend school. These nuances are not adequately captured in a measure of community attachment focused on years of residence.

Given the problem with this objective measure of community attachment, we posit that subjective measures of community attachment are important in assessing youth's community attachment. A variety of measures have been proposed to assess the subjective elements of community attachment, including feelings of belonging, feeling like the community is their home, pride in community, like living in the area, and satisfaction with the community (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Jeffres et al., 1987; McCluskey et al., 2004; McLeod et al., 1996; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996). Wilkinson (2008) offers a lengthy list of measures related to community attachment. However, the subjective measure that has been given the most attention is the intention to move away from (or stay in) the community (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Goudy, 1990; Hays & Kogl, 2007; McCluskey et al., 2004; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996; Ryan et al., 2005; Wilkinson, 2008). Jeffres, Dobos, and Sweeney (1987) describe the history of this measure. None of these studies have examined the relevance of this measure for capturing youth's community attachment.

Subjective measures are often validated against the objective measure of length of residence in a community. However, this method of validation has produced some conflicting findings, which raise questions about criterion validity. Using length of residence as a criterion variable in

studies of the adult population, some researchers find a positive correlation with subjective measures of community attachment (Jeffres et al., 1987; McLeod et al., 1996; Schellenberg, 2004), while others do not (Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996). As such, our first research question is: What are effective measures of community attachment among youth? In assessing the measurement validity, we move beyond the focus on a single criterion variable and instead examine a set of measures and how they relate to each other.

### *Civic and Political Engagement*

Community attachment and its synonymous concepts of integration, embeddedness, belonging, and sense of community have been widely used to predict participation in civic and political life. People with high community attachment may feel an obligation to be engaged, may feel they have greater stakes in the allocation of community resources, and have higher motivation to be engaged as part of helping their fellow citizens (Davidson & Cotter, 1989). The theoretical consensus is that a person who is more attached to their community participates more in civic and political life.

Numerous studies test the relationship between community attachment (measured in various ways) and involvement in civic and political life (measured in various ways). These findings are largely based on the adult population and use measures of community attachment that are problematic in understanding youth's experiences. However, even among the adult population, there are questions about how to effectively measure community attachment and its implications on engagement in civic and political life. Again, the length of residence measure garners a lot of attention, but it may not be the best way to measure the degree of community attachment. For

example, several studies use years of residence and find a relationship with civic engagement (Kang & Kwak, 2003; McLeod et al., 1996; Ryan et al., 2005). Others do not find a significant effect of length of residency on civic and political engagement (Jones, 2006; McCluskey et al., 2004). Smet and Van Ham's (2013) meta-analysis identifies 18 studies assessing residential mobility and find that only 10 of these studies affirm a correlation with voting. Given these precedents in the adult population, we question the relevance of this variable for understanding youth's community attachment as well as this measure's role in predicting youth's engagement.

Few studies measure community attachment as a subjective variable when predicting volunteering and voting. Davidson and Cotter (1989) use subjective measures and find a correlation between these measures and voting. Ryan et al. (2005) also use a subjective measure, i.e., feeling at home and plans to stay in the community, and find a small direct effect on volunteering (.04). The strongest evidence is from McLeod et al. (1996) who use a scale of community attachment that includes: like living in the community, likelihood of moving away, and feeling like the area is home. They find a significant effect of subjective measures of community attachment on civic engagement (e.g., working to bring about change) controlling for the objective measures of community attachment (length of residence). However, the effect is not significant for more politically oriented engagement, such as voting in local elections (McLeod et al., 1996). In contrast, McCluskey et al. (2004) find that their subjective community attachment scale affects more politically oriented engagement, such as voting, but does not affect more civically oriented engagement (e.g., working as part of a social group). Both studies are based on a random sample of adult residents in Madison, Wisconsin. The conflicting findings



suggest that there may be different mechanisms in promoting civic versus political engagement; however, the researchers present conflicting ideas about these mechanisms.

None of the studies mentioned above use subjective measures of community attachment to understand youth's engagement in civic and political life. Some youth may establish quick and strong connections to a new community, while others view their new community as a temporary home. These sentiments capture real variations in levels of community attachment. We expect that sentiments are driving civic and political engagement among youth. Our second research question is to what degree does community attachment affect civic and political engagement among youth?

### *Methods*

#### Sample

There are no perfect sampling frames for recruiting youth to participate in a survey, which has led many researchers to opt for student samples. Students are interesting as a case study of youth's community attachment and engagement. First, many students move to pursue post-secondary education. As such, we have a high degree of variation among students in terms of residential mobility and thus, variation in experiences of community attachment. Second, students are offered plenty of opportunities to engage in civic and political life. Some schools host voting stations and others host all candidate forums where students can learn about elections. Schools often host volunteer fairs where students can connect with community organizations and volunteer. Furthermore, some schools offer course credit or transcript documentation for volunteering in community organizations. As such, motivations, rather than

structural opportunities, seem critical to understanding who does participate and who does not participate. In this context, community attachment is extremely important. Finally, students are an important critical mass of youth. There are approximately three million students in Canada and the USA in any given year (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). Approximately 60% of Canadian youth aged 18 to 24 years are enrolled in post-secondary schooling (Blais & Loewen, 2011; Clark, 2007; Galarneau, Morissette, & Usalcas, 2013). As such, the student experience is common, rather than an exception, in youth's life experiences.

We used a random sample of students enrolled at a Canadian university. MacEwan University is one of Alberta's newest universities. The institution is transitioning from a community college. Community colleges are arguably more representative of youth in a community, than more elite universities where tuition is higher and entrance standards more competitive (Hargittai, 2010; Hooghe, Stolle, Mahéo, & Vissers, 2010). The university has three campuses across the City of Edmonton and offers certificate, diploma and degree programs. The Edmonton metropolitan area hosts approximately 218,055 youth aged 18 to 29 years (Statistics Canada, 2012).

We used a stratified random sample of 2000 students enrolled in the Winter 2013 semester (N=14750). The sample frame was based on records provided by the Registrar's Office upon ethics approval. Of the 2000 students asked to participate, 419 students accessed the survey. However, there was a significant drop off after the full page consent form on the first page of the survey and a slight drop off prior to answering the community attachment questions. As such, we have a functional sample size of 381. Is this sample size large enough? According to the 2011 Census, there are approximately 5.2 million youth aged 18 to 29 years in Canada (Statistics

Canada, 2012). The margin of error for this survey is 5% (95% confidence interval), which is well within survey research industry standards. This sampling ratio would be akin to a sample size of 2,575 to represent the 33.5 million people in Canada. Furthermore, the sample size is similar to other studies in this area of research (Jeffres et al., 1987; Kang & Kwak, 2003; McLeod et al., 1996; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996). We argue that the sample size is sufficient for our research questions.<sup>2</sup>

### Volunteering, Voting

Civic and political engagement are measured by volunteering and voting in the past year. We asked about volunteering to help a neighbour or friend, volunteering as part of an education program or work requirement, and volunteering for a group or organization. We focus on the latter measure as this measure draws upon a higher degree of motivation than required volunteer work and because this type of volunteering is most aligned with our conception of civic engagement. Approximately half of students reported volunteering in the past year (Table 1), which is consistent with Vezina and Crompton's (2012) finding for this age group. Voting was measured as part of a series of questions about involvement in political activities. Voting was the most common political activity among these students. Because of the great concern about youth's low voter turnout, we decided to focus on this variable. The question asked about voting in any municipal, provincial, or federal election. Approximately 45.31% of students reported

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<sup>2</sup> Using the American Public Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Response Rate 2 formula, the overall response rate was 19.05% with females more likely to respond than males. The response rate is typical for student surveys (Klofstad, 2011; Millar & Dillman, 2011; NSSE, 2013). Although the response rate was less than 20%, the response rate is not the only indicator of data quality (Groves et al., 2009: 59). While high response rates are thought to decrease the risk of nonresponse bias (Groves et al., 2009: 59), research does not support this conclusion (Groves & Peytcheva, 2008). To assess nonresponse bias, we compared the respondents to the survey to those students who were in the sample frame and to students who were in the population frame as recommended by Groves et al. (2009). We found consistency in terms of the distributions of gender, age, and year of study.

voting in the past year (Table 1), which is consistent with the General Social Survey 2008 finding for 18 to 24 year olds in the Prairie provinces (Statistics Canada, 2009).

[insert Table 1 here]

### Community attachment

Both objective and subjective measures of community attachment are used. As subjective measures, students were asked to agree or disagree with three statements using a seven-point scale. These statements were: “I care about others who live in the Edmonton area,” “I like living in the Edmonton area” and “I feel like a member of the Edmonton community.” In addition, we asked about their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with living in the Edmonton area. As mentioned, many studies examine community attachment in terms of the intent to stay in a community. We measured this concept by asking a question about the importance (or unimportance) of moving away from the city after graduation, which we reversed coded into a variable about wanting to stay. These measures also used a seven point scale, which was bipolar and had a neutral middle point (recoded to 0-6).

Of the various items used to measure community attachment as a subjective factor, the measures “caring about others who live in the Edmonton area” and “like living in the Edmonton area” had the highest averages (Table 1). Conversely “wanting to stay in this city after graduation” had the lowest average. In other words, students reported that they cared about others in this city and liked living in the city, but they were indifferent about living in the city after graduation.

To isolate the effects of community attachment, we control for home ownership and having children, which are discussed as correlates of community attachment in the adult population

(Kang & Kwak, 2003; McCluskey et al., 2004; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Paek et al., 2005; Viswanath et al., 2000). Only 15.22% of respondents own their own house or apartment. Approximately 11.05% of respondents have their own children. These low frequencies are expected in a study of youth.

### *Findings*

Among the community attachment measures, the highest correlations are among the subjective measures of community attachment. For example, there was a high correlation among responses about whether one likes living in this city and satisfaction with living in this city ( $r = .784, p < .001$ ). There are some significant correlations between the subjective and objective measures of community attachment. For example, length of residency and feeling like a member of the community are correlated ( $r = .190, p < .001$ ).

[insert Table 2 here]

In terms of measuring community attachment, we look at the content validity of the measures of community attachment as well as scale reliability. Based on an assessment of the scale reliability for the five subjective items using differing seven point scales (Cronbach's alpha = .806), we decided to construct a four item scale and exclude the variable about staying in the city after graduation (Cronbach's alpha = .826). The other reason to exclude this item from the scale is there is a separate literature addressing this measure. As mentioned, of the measures of subjective attachment, students report the lowest levels of attachment using this measure than the other measures.

[insert Table 3 here]

As the four-item community attachment measure increases, the likelihood of volunteering increases ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.09, p < .001$ ; Table 3). For each unit increase on this scale, which ranges in values between 0 and 24, the odds of students volunteering increase by 9 percent. In the multivariate model, intention to stay in the city after graduation decreases likelihood of volunteering ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.83, p = .017$ ). In other words, as intent to stay in the city increases by one unit, the odds of students volunteering decrease by 17 percent. These subjective measures of community attachment are the only significant predictors of volunteering.

For voting, length of residency ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.55, p = .003$ ) increases the likelihood of voting. The four-item community attachment measure predicts who votes ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.06, p = .025$ ). For each unit increase on this scale, which ranges in values between 0 and 24, the odds of students voting increase by 6 percent. Unlike volunteering, intention to stay in the city does not have a significant effect on voting among students ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.92, p = .290$ ).

### *Discussion*

This study is an important contribution to the study of youth's community attachment and its connection to civic and political engagement. Little research has been done on this topic. This study offers a comprehensive look at youth's community attachment and its impact on engagement.

Subjective measures of community attachment, such as caring for others in the city and feeling like a member of the community, were related to volunteering and voting. The effects are

consistent with the little research that exists on this topic (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Ryan et al., 2005; McCluskey et al., 2004; McLeod et al., 1996). Our study validates this finding for a subsection of the population. Unlike other studies, we find the effect of subjective measures of community attachment to be significant for both voting and volunteering, whereas other researchers find the effects for one type of engagement and not the other (see previous discussion of McCluskey et al., 2004 and McLeod et al., 1996). A direct comparison of effect sizes for this study and the other studies is not possible, because all of these other studies used multiple item scales to measure the dependent variables (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Kang & Kwak, 2003; McCluskey et al., 2004; McLeod et al., 1996; Paek et al., 2005; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996; Shah et al., 2009). We would argue that focusing on these variables in their singularity adds much needed clarity about the effects of community attachment on volunteering compared to voting. The findings have clear policy implications. Efforts to build emotional bonds to a community will have pay-offs in terms of both civic and political engagement. However, to address political engagement, specifically, requires programs that reduce residential mobility.

The findings raise questions about the appropriateness of popular measures of community attachment. In particular, the findings suggest that the intent to remain in a community is not good measure of community attachment among students. This variable does not strongly correlate with other measures. In the multivariate model, this measure produced counter-intuitive results. If students believed that it was important to stay in the community, then students were less likely to volunteer. Perhaps the findings reflect the unique situation of students, but maybe the results are reflective of youth's contemporary sentiments around community attachment. Their attachment to community may be strong, but without long-term commitment. This finding

merits further research. Ideally, this research would be qualitative research in which youth could discuss their sense of community attachment and the challenges of forming and sustaining attachments to community.

Length of residence in community did not have a substantive effect on volunteering, replicating findings by Jones (2006) and McCluskey et al. (2004). However, this measure did predict voting. As such, there seems to be different mechanisms at work in explaining the propensity to volunteer versus vote. The reasons for the greater strength of this measure in predicting political engagement, as opposed to civic engagement, are unclear. Perhaps length of residence in a community increases awareness of candidates and local issues and thus, indirectly increases the odds of voting. We recommend further research in this area.

Do the findings apply to youth in general?<sup>3</sup> While students are an interesting case study of community attachment and civic and political engagement, they are only a subset of the population of youth. The findings in this paper are reflected in surveys of the general population of the American population (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Jones, 2006; Ryan et al., 2005; McCluskey et al., 2004; McLeod et al., 1996). As such, it seems reasonable to expect the same pattern of effects between attachment and engagement for youth in general. While our findings are consistent with other studies, none of these studies include a lengthy list of measures of community attachment, nor do they offer a comprehensive assessment of the relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Another related question is whether the results are specific to a particular city and thus have limited generalizability. Most of the literature faces the same issue, because research is based on city samples, not national samples (see Connerly & Maras, 1985; Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Jeffres et al., 1987; McCluskey et al., 2004; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; McLeod et al., 1996; Kang & Kwak, 2003; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996; Viswanath et al., 2000).



between community attachment and engagement. We believe that the correlations among subjective measures of community attachment and engagement would also appear among a broader cross-section of youth.

Further research should go beyond a cross-sectional design and examine longitudinal data to examine how community attachment evolves over time and how this evolution affects engagement. This longitudinal design would be better at examining the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between community attachment and engagement. A longitudinal design would also help untangle the causal ordering of the different measures, e.g., does length of residence cause changes in subjective measures of community attachment?

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Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for Respondents*

	Population	Sample	Respondents
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	64.13%	50.0%	60.63%
Male	35.87%	50.0%	39.37%
<b>Year of Study</b>			
First Year	43.61%	42.65%	45.41%
Second Year	36.25%	36.45%	37.53%
Third Year	10.17%	10.65%	7.87%
Fourth Year	9.96%	10.25%	9.19%
<b>Age</b>	25.00 (7.35)	25.12 (7.42)	25.93 (8.25)
<b>Engagement</b>			
Volunteering in Past Year	-	-	50.94%
Voting in Past Year	-	-	45.31%
<b>Community Attachment</b>			
Like living in this city	-	-	4.38 (1.58)
Care about others in this city	-	-	4.54 (1.35)
Feel like a member of this city	-	-	3.66 (1.67)
Satisfied with living in this city	-	-	3.99 (1.58)
Want to stay in this city after graduate	-	-	3.22 (1.70)
Length of residency in city (Coded as less than 4 years, more than 4 years, entire life)	-	-	1.06 (0.82)
<b>Other covariates</b>			
Employed	-	-	62.50%
Own apartment or house	-	-	15.22%
Have children	-	-	11.05%

Table 2  
*Correlation Matrix of Measures of Community Attachment*

	Like	Care	Member	Satisfied	Stay	Residency
Like living in this city	1.00					
Care about others in this city	.408 <.001	1.00				
Feel like a member of this city	.551 <.001	.533 <.001	1.00			
Satisfied with living in this city	.784 <.001	.380 <.001	.573 <.001	1.00		
Stay in this city after graduate	.476 <.001	.164 .002	.298 <.001	.401 <.001	1.00	
Length of residency in city	.104 .046	.089 .088	.190 <.001	.095 .069	.063 .226	1.00

Table 3

*Multivariate Logistic Regression of Community Attachment on Engagement*

	Volunteer				Voting			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Odds Ratio Exp(B)	<i>P</i>	Odds Ratio Exp(B)	<i>p</i>	Odds Ratio Exp(B)	<i>p</i>	Odds Ratio Exp(B)	<i>p</i>
Constant	0.47	.059	0.61	.413	0.22	<.001	0.183	.010
<i>Subjective Measures of Community Attachment</i>								
Community attachment 4-item measure	1.09	<.001	1.09	<.001	1.06	.021	1.06	.025
Stay in this city after graduate	0.83	.015	0.83	.017	0.93	.335	0.92	.290
<i>Objective Measures of Community Attachment</i>								
Length of residency in city	0.90	.440	0.92	.566	1.68	.001	1.55	.003
<i>Other covariates</i>								
Female=1	-	-	0.96	.872	-	-	0.74	.203
Year of Study	-	-	0.98	.895	-	-	1.07	.601
Employed=1	-	-	0.81	.378	-	-	1.58	.063
Own apartment or house=1	1.65	.153	1.81	.130	3.32	.002	3.80	.001
Have children=1	1.46	.332	1.49	.353	0.43	.046	0.48	.112
Age	-	-	0.99	.750	-	-	1.00	.996
	Cox & Snell R <sup>2</sup> = 4.68%		Cox & Snell R <sup>2</sup> = 4.96%		Cox & Snell R <sup>2</sup> = 8.93%		Cox & Snell R <sup>2</sup> = 10.38%	
	Log Likelihood = 468.13		Log Likelihood = 465.13		Log Likelihood = 449.09		Log Likelihood = 443.48	
	<i>p</i> = .005		<i>p</i> = .038		<i>p</i> <.001		<i>p</i> <.001	