

ABSTRACT

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The Civic and Political Engagement of Collaborative Philanthropists: Evidence from Giving Circles in the United States and the United Kingdom

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Abstract:

Much has been speculated about traditional voluntary associations as schools of democracy, teaching people civic skills and virtues and serving as avenues for civic and political engagement; however, debate continues about the degree to which voluntary associations cause greater civic and political engagement (serving as schools of democracy) or attract people already prone to such engagement (serving as pools of democracy). Additionally, the existing research focuses on traditional associations and large-scale data sets that make it difficult to unpack the conditions that encourage people to develop civic and political engagement.

This proposed research focuses on understanding if participation in new forms of philanthropic voluntary association giving circles lead to civic and political engagement. Giving circles come in a range of sizes and foci, but the defining attributes of these groups are that they involve individuals who together decide on support for organizations or individuals, giving money and sometimes time. They also informally or formally educate members about philanthropy, charities, and issues in the community; include a social dimension; engage members in grant making and running the group; and typically maintain independence from any one charity or social enterprise. Many are formed of small groups and loose networks and are seen by participants as a much less bureaucratic and more proactive approach to philanthropy than has traditionally been the case.

The research draws on data gathered in the U.S. and the U.K. through surveys of members and past members of giving circles and donors not in giving circles, as well as interviews with giving circle members and past members. Following previous research, indicators of civic and political engagement examined include: giving, volunteering, participation in efforts to address problems in the community and change government policy, and participation in other civic and political activities such as voting and contacting public officials.

The findings suggest giving circles have a positive impact on giving, volunteering and some forms of civic engagement, but much less impact on political engagement. Findings also show impact varies by level and length of engagement, suggesting giving circles may serve as both schools and pools of democracy.

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