

Adults' Civic Engagement in the U. S. and Germany: Evidence from the PIAAC Survey

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We examine civic engagement among foreign- and native-born adults in the US and Germany—world-leading nations with different responses to immigration and assimilation. Civic engagement involves the practices and beliefs underpinning the democratic functions of citizenry, and is operationalized in this study as voluntary work, political efficacy, and social trust.

Research Questions

1. Among adults in the US and Germany, are age, education, gender, immigration status, skill proficiency, work status, and number of years worked associated with civic engagement (i.e., voluntary work for non-profit organizations, political efficacy, and dimensions of social trust)?
2. Do the associations of age, education, gender, immigration status, skill proficiency, work status, and number of years worked with civic engagement (i.e., voluntary work for non-profit organizations, political efficacy, and dimensions of social trust) differ between individuals in the US and Germany?

Findings and Discussion

Across both countries, only education was a consistently positive predictor of civic engagement, and different forms of skills—literacy, numeracy, and digital problem solving—predicted dimensions of civic engagement. For comparisons between the two countries, immigrant status was negatively related to volunteer work in Germany, but there was no difference between foreign- and native-born adults in the US for volunteering. There were positive relationships of skills to political efficacy and aspects of social trust in both countries. While numeracy and digital problem solving were strongly associated with social trust in the U.S., it was literacy that was strongly associated with the social trust in Germany. These findings suggest that with greater opportunities for skill improvement, social trust may also increase.

Policy Implications

The finding of no differences between native-born and immigrant adults in aspects of civic engagement suggest that, at least for the US, policy efforts to promote societal integration may be showing success. Also, efforts to improve adults' skills might be necessary, but not sufficient, to increase civic engagement. Policymakers cannot assume that efforts to increase literacy (or other skills) will lead to increased civic engagement. Better skills may contribute to attitudes such as social trust; but better skills may not lead to change in behaviors, such as participating in voluntary work.