

Ethics Positions and the Civic Engagement of Business Students in Colombia

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Abstract. Ethical decision-making and the participation of young people in politics and business are called for. As future leaders, business students are key to tackle global challenges. Some researchers have inquired about how ethics and engagement in communities relate in samples of young people. However, little is known about how ethics positions and civic engagement specifically act in students of business. In this study, we analyzed data of 614 Colombian management students. Using structural equation modeling, we explore how ethics positions and civic engagement relate among undergraduates in business and note support for previous research findings. Our results suggest that, if they are willing to positively impact their communities, business schools should continue to invest in ethics courses, irrespective of the ethics positions of students.

Keywords: civic engagement, ethics positions, business students, structural equation modeling.

1. Introduction

The identification of strategies to solve current global challenges implies seeking the participation of young people (Hwang and Kim, 2018). However, younger individuals have been less represented in civic engagement roles historically, and this trend persists today. According to the United Nations Development Program (2024), people aged between 18 and 29 comprise the largest generation ever but they remain isolated from the center of decision-making processes. This is particularly so in lower-income countries, those grappling with educational deficits and political instability, where youth often find themselves excluded from civic discussions and decision-making processes. This exclusion can lead to feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation, as these young individuals may perceive civic institutions as unresponsive or inaccessible to their interests and needs (Alcantar *et al.*, 2024). Factors contributing to this sustained underrepresentation include a lack of political efficacy, which can be pronounced among those who have experienced bureaucratic inefficiencies or failures in

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advocacy, leading to disillusionment with political processes (Bennett and Hays, 2022). While previous generations may have had similar feelings, today's youth navigate a landscape characterized by social media and digital communication channels, where engagement often contrasts with traditional modalities. This digital native status has changed the way young people express their civic interests and activism. They may choose platforms that do not translate into tangible civic participation, hence creating a perception of engagement without significant impact (Bennett and Hays, 2022). Given today's acute awareness of social justice, environmental issues, and political accountability, educators and policymakers must adapt their approaches to better align with these interests.

By implementing tailored civic education programs that specifically cater to marginalized communities and integrating experiential learning opportunities, we can enhance inclusiveness in civic engagement and help dismantle the structures that perpetuate isolation (Altaany and Abdelbary, 2024).

Similarly, young people have been left behind from critical business decisions as companies' boards are mainly comprised of people over 50 years of age (Korn Ferry, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2022). It is noteworthy that decisions made in businesses play an important role in the resolution of current global challenges (Mio *et al.*, 2020).

According to Cammaerts *et al.* (2013), young people's apathy is just a myth. Conversely to the popular idea that young people do not care about politics and are apathetic toward democracy, they found that young Europeans want to participate in democracy but feel that traditional politics do not meet their expectations. Besides stigmas regarding the characteristics of this population and other challenges to their participation in community life, there is a lack of research and data about participation and Civic Engagement (CE) in young people (UNICEF, 2020). With this paper, we wish to contribute to the understanding of the CE of future business leaders. CE is a multidimensional construct that includes attitudes, beliefs, behaviors (Ballard *et al.*, 2019), as well as values and pro-social and political skills (Wray-Lake *et al.*, 2017). In this study, we inquired about the relationship between the CE and ethical positions of business students. Older generations are rapidly retiring from key business positions which eventually will be occupied by business students (World Economic Forum, 2022). Business and Ethics education is then in charge of bringing awareness about the importance and drivers of the participation of young generations' key social and business decisions. We believe that a first step to a necessary reform of business ethics education directed in part to help students be capable of serving greater societal aims (Zsolnai, 2024) precisely consists of collecting empirical evidence about how CE and ethics positions interplay in current business students. For decades, stakeholders have called for educational practice based on the best necessary available evidence, since it can inform professional judgments and practices of educational policy and practice. Evidence-based education operates by using quality worldwide available research and contributing to knowledge

gaps through sound research. Some contributions to educational practices may consist of delivering evidence about the strength and patterns between variables (Davies, 1999). In line with this, we provide evidence concerning the link between CE and ethics positions, aiming at informing education policy and practice directed to future business leaders.

To frame this contribution, we use Forsyth's (1980) Ethical Position Theory (EPT). The framework has been widely used in studies in psychology and other fields to explain individual variations in moral judgment. It comprises idealism and relativism dimensions at its heart, essential for relating molar action outcomes to the existence of rules of morality as either universal or contextual. Even though EPT has been tested in different cultures and disciplines, including some applications in the business field, to our knowledge there is no evidence supporting its applicability to the study of civic engagement in business students. This, therefore, is a gap where focused research is needed. Our aim is not to conflate but, rather, to recognize that the non-robust conceptual grounding and psychometric stability of EPT makes it a suitable starting point for understanding how ethical positions influence civic engagement in business students.

Our argument proceeds in three steps. First, we introduce EPT and its theoretical foundations as a framework for studying moral reasoning. Second, the general use of EPT theory in all fields is accepted, stressing the scanty literature in terms of the civics of business students. Third, building on the evidence that there is indeed a difference in moral reasoning based on whether one studies business or some other field (Weber and Elm, 2018), we underscore the difference this population might evince. The above progressions have been structured to situate our study as making a new and special intervention to fill a precise gap at the intersection of ethics and civic learning. This is something that should tell the story to educators and curriculum developers about the ethical angles of business students and how these angles might reflect their civic attitudes and behaviors. It is the link that needs to be clearly understood so that pedagogical tools can be developed, which not only concern ethical competence but also bring about the socially responsible leadership type. In this way, our study can combine both empirical research and improvements in teaching practices in how to teach business ethics.

2. Youth Civic Engagement

There are several definitions of CE. The American Psychological Association defines CE as the individual or collective actions that aim to identify and solve challenges, problems or public issues (American Psychological Association, 2009). CE also relates to the degree of participation or involvement from a person toward community affairs (Brandtzaeg, 2017). This participation can be active or passive and may be carried out through voluntary contributions to society and the

solutions of its problems (Quan-Haase and Wellman, 2004). Conceptually, CE can be divided into Civic Engagement Attitudes (CEA) and Civic Engagement Behaviors (CEB). CEA refers to the individual's beliefs and feelings concerning his(her) involvement in the community and the perceived capacity to make changes in that community. On the other hand, CEB can be defined as the individual's attempts to engage and introduce changes in the community (Doolittle and Faul, 2013).

The manifestations of CE include social activities and an involvement in political, social, environmental, religious, student, sport, digital literacy, cultural, nonprofit or volunteer groups (Robinson, 2019). Social interactions and personal contact with friends, neighbors, or relatives are important for the realization of CE (Kim *et al.*, 2017). However, CE can also take place through individual actions while interacting with a democratic institutional framework, writing letters to an elected officer and voting (American Psychological Association, 2009). In fact, individual efforts in CE may help promote state accountability and foster public goods

Civic commitment has been positively related to the development of social capital, job skills, and academic and job performance (Ballard *et al.*, 2019). It has also been tied to wellbeing, citizen satisfaction and the sense of belonging (Stefaniak *et al.*, 2017); income and educational levels, mental health, healthy habits development (Ballard *et al.*, 2019); interaction with other voters (Horiuchi *et al.*, 2023); and social sustainability (Verdini *et al.*, 2017). In addition, CE has as well been linked to social work organizations through volunteer actions that promote the social wellbeing of vulnerable groups (Hong *et al.*, 2022).

3. Ethics Position

According to a wider definition, ethics may be understood as beliefs about what is good and bad. These beliefs are the basis for judging when a behavior is appropriate and guide us to relate to other individuals and groups (Burnes and By, 2012). These definitions and other ideas about business ethics rely on advances in fields such as teleology (utilitarianism) and deontology. Whereas Kant (2011) posits that rational beings must act so that their actions are judged as good by other rational beings. Mill (1984) contends that good deeds are those which seek profit or personal happiness. Other approaches to ethics have subsequently emerged. For instance, ethical skepticism proposes that unfringeable moral codes cannot be formulated since they doubt the existence of common beliefs.

Based on ethical skepticism, deontology and utilitarianism Forsyth's (1980) ethical position theory asserts that moral principles and personal intuition determine the ethical positions of individuals. In this line, the author posits that individual preferences for relativism and idealism shape moral judgments and therefore explain why people react differently to the situations that confront morality. Forsyth's framework provides a comprehensive overview of ethical