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How local environmental stewardship diversifies democracy

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ABSTRACT
Although recent studies have suggested that environmental participation may be a countertrend to decreasing civic engagement in the United States, there are very few empirical studies that examine these claims. This paper studies participation in local environmental stewardship as such a countertrend. Using data collected from participants in the Watershed Stewards Academies (WSAs) of Maryland, we assess how these organisations are successful in mobilising individuals to be environmentally and civically engaged in their communities. We argue that hybrid organisations like the WSAs represent a countertrend to diminishing rates of civic engagement by offering citizens what a “paper-membership” cannot: the chance to lead their own environmental restoration projects, create tangible change in their communities, and network with other like-minded individuals. These environmental programmes serve to diversify democracy at the local level, providing a unique form of civic engagement and enriching the connections between individual citizens and their civic communities.

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Introduction
Despite observations of civically active and engaged Americans in previous work (see particularly Tocqueville [1835] 1966; see also Almond and Verba 1963; Ladd 1999; Wuthnow 1991), more recent research on civic participation in the United States has shown that Americans are increasingly retreating from the public sphere (see Lee, McQuarrie, and Walker 2015 for a recent overview; see also McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006 for a more in-depth discussion of social isolation in the United States). In Putnam’s words, Americans “feel vaguely and uncomfortably disconnected” from one another (2000: 402; see also Bellah et al. 1996; Putnam 1995; Sander and Putnam 2010). Related research that focuses on various aspects of the political system, such as voting behaviour (e.g. Eisner 2004; Piven and Cloward 2000; but see McDonald and Popkin 2001), social capital, political trust, volunteering and participation more broadly defined, has also affirmed these sweeping conclusions (e.g. Almond and Verba 1963; Eliasoph 1998, 2016; Painter and Paxton 2014; Putnam 1995, 2000; see also Smith 1994). These patterns of declining engagement are also connected to the professionalisation of social movement organisations (e.g. Staggenborg 1988). Passive “checkbook” memberships in large professionalised organisations are more prevalent, which may lead organisations to lose contact with citizens at the local level and “diminish democracy” (see particularly Painter and Paxton 2014; Skocpol 2003).

At the same time, a number of scholars offer conflicting views, focusing on how Americans remain civically engaged (e.g. Boyte and Kari 1996; Eckstein 2001; Fisher 2006; Paxton 1999; Rotolo 1999; Sampson et al. 2005; Skocpol 1996, 2003; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Weir and Ganz 1997; Wuthnow 2004). For example, Wuthnow finds that otherwise disconnected individuals may
become civically engaged out of a desire for self-fulfillment, arguing that “individualism does not necessarily contradict holding altruistic values and engaging in a wide variety of caring and community-service activities” (1991, 23; see also Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Lichterman 1995, 1996; McCarthy 1987; Westphal 2003; Wuthnow 1998). Furthermore, according to Lichterman, the individual’s “personalized form of political commitment underlies significant portions of numerous recent grassroots movements in the US” (1996, 5; see also Fisher and Mcnerney 2012).

While Putnam’s work is perhaps most famous for describing the decline of social capital and active membership in voluntary organisations, the work also identifies the contemporary environmental movement as a “countertrend” to this decline (1995, 2000). However, it is important to note that his description of the environmental movement focuses exclusively on professionalised national environmental organisations (see particularly Putnam 2000, chapter 9). More recent work on environmental stewardship has begun to unpack this countetrend looking at locally embedded groups (see particularly Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015; Krasny and Tidball 2015). In their book about environmental stewards who participated in the MillionTreesNYC initiative, Fisher and her colleagues find that when volunteers engage in environmental stewardship, they are also more likely to engage in other civic and political activities (Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015; see also Overdevest, Orr, and Stepenuck 2004). In an international context, two studies focusing on local environmental initiatives borne of adopting Agenda 21 provide support for the argument that hands-on citizen engagement builds social capital at the community level, which in turn promises environmentally sustainable long-term change (Lyth et al. 2017; Selman and Parker 1997). This research highlights how participation in environmental movements, in particular through local environmental stewardship activities, is intricately connected to broader trends of civic engagement and community involvement.

This paper builds on this limited research on the role of environmental participation as a countetrend to declining civic engagement in the United States, identifying and exploring the opportunities that engagement in environmental stewardship affords to volunteers. We present data collected through surveys and open-ended semi-structured interviews with participants in the Watershed Stewards Academies of Maryland (WSA) to demonstrate how environmental stewardship organisations are successfully mobilising individuals to be civically engaged in their communities. Based on our findings, we argue that these groups diversify democracy by providing volunteers with opportunities to be civically engaged in ways that represent a countetrend to passive civic engagement. In the pages that follow, we present a literature review that summarises dominant trends in the study of civic engagement, focusing on environmental movements and stewardship. Local environmental stewardship organisations like the WSAs tend to have hybrid structures that combine non-profit and private organisations, running with little to no state funding and sustaining their programmes off of diverse funding and resource streams. Therefore, we also review the literature on hybrid organisations.

**Civic participation and environmental stewardship**

As has been previously noted, environmental organisations present one of the cases Putnam defines as a “countertrend” in which individuals are becoming more civically engaged (2000). Putnam demonstrates this finding by presenting data on individuals in paid positions with national organisations (see particularly Putnam 2000, chapter 9; see also Berry 1999). Numerous other studies highlight similar findings in a variety of cases where Americans are becoming more civically engaged through environmental stewardship at the local level (Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015; Fisher and Galli 2016; Horton 2004; Portney 2005; Portney and Berry 2010; Sirianni and Friedland 2001, chapter 3; Weber 2000).

Related research provides evidence that environmental stewardship activities are linked to increased levels of civic participation. For example, Overdevest and colleagues find volunteers in a stream monitoring project in Wisconsin to be more politically engaged than the average citizen.
They conclude that this type of environmental programme may have what they call “positive spillover effects in generating a more engaged and connected citizenry” (183). In a study of volunteer stewards in New York City, Fisher and her colleagues come to similar conclusions. Volunteers who planted trees in NYC were statistically significantly more likely to participate in a range of civic and environmental activities. Follow-up interviews with the volunteer tree planters showed that environmental stewardship served as a gateway to other forms of civic engagement (Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015). Contributing to the notable association between environmental stewardship and civic engagement, Shandas and Messer suggest in their study of the Portland Watershed Stewardship Program that community-based environmental stewardship programmes can increase levels of trust in local government and increase the number of citizen groups involved in environmental issues (2008; see also Miller et al. 2015). Echoing this research, Travaline and Hunold find participating in urban agriculture groups, “cultivates the political and social skills necessary for effective citizenship” (2010, 589). Building on the findings of these studies, we expect that volunteers in the WSAs in Maryland will be more civically engaged when compared to the average citizen.

Looking more broadly at the environmental movement, research has also focused on the predictors and patterns of participation in the environmental movement (Barkan 2004; Blake 2001; Bruyere and Rappe 2007; Olli, Grendstad, and Wollebaek 2001; Ryan, Kaplan, and Grese 2001). In general, this research is informative for those interested in the role of motivation, identity and values in mobilising people to participate in environmental causes (e.g. Dresner et al. 2015; Martinez and McMullin 2004; Teisl and Brien 2003), as well as the variations in participation across race, class and gender (e.g. Laidley 2013; Taylor 1997, 2002). However, there is limited understanding of how individuals who participate in the environmental movement may also engage in broader civic activities in their communities.

Connected to this research are studies of community-based environmental efforts and the local environmental organisations that are leading them (Andrews et al. 2010; Andrews and Edwards 2005; Fisher, Campbell, and Svendsen 2012). In some cases, these groups are referred to as environmental stewardship organisations, which are defined as “civic groups that conserve, manage, monitor, advocate for, and educate about a wide range of quality of life issues in urban areas” (Fisher, Campbell, and Svendsen 2012, 28). These organisations often take hybrid approaches in partnering with local businesses and local government to support and fund their programmes (Fisher and Svendsen 2013). This structure allows for flexibility, diverse funding streams and increased interaction with the local community.

Hybrid arrangements that link state, market and civil society actors have also been studied to understand environmental policies (Ansell and Gash 2007; Betsill and Bulkeley 2006; Fisher, Fritsch, and Andersen 2009; Heaney and Rojas 2014; Koontz et al. 2004; Mol and Spaargaren 2006; Siranni 2009; Sonnenfeld and Mol 2002; Spaargaren, Mol, and Butt 2006; Van Tatenhove and Leroy 2003; see also Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014 for an in-depth discussion of hybrid arrangements). As Mol and Spaargaren describe, these arrangements are frequently initiated by businesses and civic groups taking on some of the tasks and responsibilities once shouldered by government entities, and vice versa (2006, 15). In some cases, when organisations are focused on measuring the outcomes of environmental stewardship, researchers have used the term “adaptive co-management” to describe “partnerships between communities and government that take an incremental approach to managing natural resources” (Silva and Krasny 2016, 158). Based on the research on hybrid arrangements, we expect that these types of partnerships and collaborative governance arrangements may be especially well suited to the formation of civic community at the local level (Fisher and Svendsen 2013; Shandas and Messer 2008).

This paper integrates the research on environmental stewardship as a countertrend to the civic isolation of Americans, the social benefits of local environmental groups, and the importance of hybrid arrangements in environmental governance to dig deeper into understanding how environmental stewardship matters to individual citizens and their democratic participation more broadly. We argue that participation in environmental stewardship activities is helping to diversify democracy by rooting citizens to their localities in individually and socially meaningful ways – that is, in contrast to arguments that
support the diminishing democracy thesis (see especially Skocpol 2003), environmental stewardship organisations are diversifying democracy by giving volunteers opportunities to engage directly with their communities through a range of civic activities that fit under the umbrella of environmental stewardship. In the sections that follow, we present our case of the Watershed Stewardship Academies (WSAs) in Maryland and then present findings from a mixed methods study of the programme.

Studying the WSAs

The WSAs in Maryland provide an ideal case for exploring the relationship between environmental participation and civic engagement. These programmes are a part of a national effort to recruit and train individual citizens to take care of their local environments. Such efforts, which span a range of environmental issues, are based on the “master gardener” model developed by Washington State University in the 1970s. These programmes provide in-depth training courses for adult volunteers and certification in specific forms of environmental stewardship. At the same time, they incorporate local knowledge to address environmental concerns at the community level (see Smith 2008 for a more substantive discussion). For example, “citizen pruners” are trained to care for the urban forest in New York City, “weed warriors” are certified in the removal of invasive species from parks and public areas in Baltimore City and Montgomery County, Maryland, and “citizen foresters” in Washington, DC lead tree plantings and care for trees across the city. Beyond these widespread programmes, watershed restoration and preservation are the most common environmental topics addressed by this type of stewardship group. Currently, there are approximately 30 such programmes dedicated to watershed-specific issues in the United States. As we describe in the pages that follow, such programmes provide diverse opportunities for grassroots engagement.

In the case of the WSAs in Maryland, local citizens are trained to become “master watershed stewards” – volunteers who assess problems in their watersheds, educate their local communities about watershed issues, and contribute to efforts to reduce pollutant levels in the Chesapeake watershed. In 2009, Anne Arundel County established the first WSA in Maryland, and this franchise served as the original model for two more independent WSAs (several other WSAs are in the process of development). Each WSA is free to address the specific needs of their area, contextualised by their specific relationships to other community/government actors, community demographics and environmental needs, while at the same time adhering to an established model of training and outreach. This adherence is an implicit consequence of the fact that anyone who wants to start a new WSA franchise is expected to have been trained in a previously existing WSA in Maryland. The WSA programme is structured as a training programme for local residents and involves an intensive series of courses for master watershed certification. The process involves completing a course over several months that culminates with a capstone project where individuals go out into their communities to organise their own projects aimed at achieving positive environmental change. The training provided by the programme supports individual stewards in becoming local leaders by encouraging them to recognise the specific needs and capabilities of their local communities and tailor their conservation efforts to meet those needs. This study focuses on the three WSAs programmes in the state of Maryland that had graduated at least one cohort of “Master Watershed Stewards” by 2014.

The WSAs are hybrid in their organisational structure: they were established through partnerships between non-profit organisations and public agencies and funded through grants offered by municipal governments, state agencies and private foundations, rather than operating through a single funding source or relying on donations. The first Maryland WSA in the area was established in Anne Arundel County in late 2008 through a partnership between the Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Program of Anne Arundel Public Schools and the Anne Arundel County Department of Public Works. The second WSA crosses into the District of Columbia from Maryland: the National Capital Region WSA was founded in 2011 through a partnership between the District of Columbia Department of the Environment, the Anacostia Watershed Society (a non-governmental organisation), and a coalition of watershed protection groups in the Potomac, Rock Creek, Anacostia and East Patuxent

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watersheds. The third WSA in Maryland, which is based in Howard County, was started in 2012 with a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and funding from Howard County itself.

Methods

This study employs a combination of survey and interview data to understand the engagement and mobilisation of participants in the WSAs. First, we conducted a survey of WSA participants during the summer and fall of 2014. The survey was distributed to all WSA participants for whom contact information was available: any person who had participated in the WSAs in any capacity – as a master steward, board member, staff member and anyone who had attempted but did not finish the training, – was contacted to take the survey. Following the online survey, those WSA participants who indicated their willingness to be interviewed at the time of the survey were asked to participate in open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 2015. Each stage of data collection is described in more detail below.

Online survey

The first stage of this research draws from an online survey. The instrument aims to address the WSAs’ focus on watershed stewardship and was designed to be brief and non-invasive. The survey focused on three topics: basic demographics, civic and environmental stewardship activities outside and as part of the WSAs, and respondents’ social networks. The political and civic engagement questions were designed to be comparable with various social and demographic measures found in the General Social Survey’s cumulative file (1972–2012), the Roper Center Civic and Political Trends Data (1973–2014), the CIRCLE Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (2006), the Roper Center Social Capital Community Survey (2006) and the American Community Survey (2012).

The survey was distributed to each WSA participant via a personal email link using a list of email addresses supplied by the leaders of each WSA. WSA leaders also made announcements to members of their groups to encourage participation in the survey. After initial distribution of the survey, two reminders were sent via email on an individual basis to those who had not yet completed the survey. WSA leaders also sent reminder emails to their organisation mailing lists to encourage their members to participate. The sampling frame is composed of a total of 274 WSA participants from all three WSAs. In total, 154 surveys were completed, achieving a response rate of 56.2%. Table 1 presents the distribution of responses across the different WSAs in Maryland.

The data from the survey were aggregated into a single data set. The data set was analysed using Microsoft Excel and IBM’s SPSS statistical software. In addition, NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, was used to code the open-ended responses of WSA participants to contribute to the qualitative focus of the analysis, which is drawn from the follow-up interviews discussed below.

In-depth interviews

To understand the experiences of WSA participants more fully, we conducted open-ended semi-structured interviews with survey respondents who indicated they were willing to participate in an

| Table 1. Survey sample, responses and response rate by WSA. |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| WSA               | Valid emails provided as contact information | Surveys completed | Response rate by WSA |
| Anne Arundel County  | 153              | 90               | 58.8%           |
| Howard County       | 21               | 15               | 71.4%           |
| North Capital Region | 100              | 49               | 49.0%           |
| Total              | 274              | 154              | 56.2%           |
Of the 174 respondents who completed the initial survey, 91 respondents, or 52% of those who participated, indicated they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. In total, we interviewed 22 randomly selected respondents who had participated in the WSA training programme to learn more about respondents’ experiences with the WSAs.

Initially, the sampling design was structured to oversample respondents who had not completed the training and those who were still participating in the WSA coursework in order to achieve an equitable representation of the three categories of participants in the follow-up interviews. Due to the low number of responses from those who did not finish the training, we chose to interview a random sample of participants until theoretical saturation was found. The overall response rate of 43.1% for all interview respondents was somewhat reduced by faulty contact information supplied by respondents at the time of the survey as opposed to non-responses. Table 2 presents the distribution of participants in the interview component of the study in terms of their levels of training in the WSAs.

The interview protocol was developed utilising sensitising concepts based on the findings of the initial survey and a review of the relevant literature (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Interviews largely focused on how participants became involved with the WSAs, why they decided to participate, and what they hoped to achieve by completing the training. Interviews with respondents were continued until theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kuzel 1999). In other words, we continued data collection until there was a clear point of diminishing returns in continuing the interviews and dominant themes were made clear. Because the WSAs are small, local organisations with central cadres of highly engaged volunteers, our sample of respondents represents the interests and experiences of a specific and localised group of environmental stewards. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed according to a coding scheme based on the sensitising concepts and the emergence of inductive themes. Pseudonyms are used throughout the discussion of the findings to protect the privacy of the stewards who shared their stories.

### Findings

We begin the review of our findings by analysing survey data to understand the demographics of WSA participants. We then shift to a focused discussion of the types of civic engagement reported by survey respondents. Then, we turn to qualitative interview data to understand the ways in which WSA participants connected their environmental stewardship activities to broader forms of civic participation.

### Who participates in the WSAs?

Consistent with research on volunteerism in general (e.g. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003), as well as volunteer work that is explicitly environmental (e.g. Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015; Travaline and Hunold 2010), our survey results demonstrate that the WSA participants were predominantly white, female and well educated. The mean age of volunteers was 51.5 years with a slightly left-skewed distribution, given a median age of 53.5. Nearly two-thirds of our respondents were female (64.4%) and, of the 92.5% of the sample that answered a question about their racial/ethnic backgrounds, nearly three quarters of respondents identified as white (78%). For those who identified as non-white, 14% of respondents reported being Black and 2%
identified as Asian. Although no respondents identified as Hispanic or Native American, a small proportion of respondents (6%) responded as “other”. The volunteers who participated in this study were well educated, reporting statistically significantly higher levels of education compared to the average for the communities in which they live. Table 3 presents comparisons of these findings with the population estimates of the areas that the WSAs are intended to represent (Montgomery County, Anne Arundel County, Washington, DC, Prince George’s County and Howard County).

**Civic engagement of WSA participants**

Similar to Fisher and colleagues’ findings in their research on volunteer stewards in New York City (2015), we find that WSA participants reported being much more civically engaged than the average US citizen. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing high levels of engagement among environmental stewards (Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015; Overdevest, Orr, and Stepenuck 2004; Shandas and Messer 2008). Survey respondents were asked to report whether they had participated in a range of civic activities in the previous year (between the fall of 2013 and summer of 2014). Responses to these questions demonstrate that WSA participants are civically engaged at much higher rates on most measures of civic engagement in comparison with a sample representative of the US population. WSA participants were most likely to attend a public, town, community board, or school meeting, with nearly 82% of respondents reporting that they had attended that sort of meeting (compared to 24% of the general population). This finding may be due, in part, to the hybrid organisational structure of the WSAs, which are embedded within local governments and permitting boards. Therefore, WSA members routinely attend public meetings as part of their training and leadership activities. Also, nearly two-thirds of WSA participants reported that they had signed a petition within the last year, a number that is nearly twice that reported by the general public. Furthermore, WSA participants were more likely than not to report contacting an elected government official, and nearly three times more likely to do so than the average American.

Table 4 compares the proportion of WSA participants to proportion estimates of the national population that have participated in a number of civic activities. In reviewing these comparisons, we find that WSA participants participate in these civic activities at statistically significant greater rates than the general population for every activity with the exception of running for a public office and working for a political party.

Given that our findings from WSA participants are consistent with the limited research (Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015; Overdevest, Orr, and Stepenuck 2004), finding them to be a civically engaged and politically active group of citizens, we now ask: what motivates individual citizens to participate in the WSA programmes? At the end of the survey, we asked respondents several
open-ended questions, including: “Briefly, why did you join the Watershed Stewards Academy? What motivated you to participate?” When asked about their reasons for joining the WSAs, most respondents reflected on wanting to work toward ameliorating environmental problems, wishing to know more about watershed issues, wanting to be more involved in their local community, and wanting to network with others. Most respondents wrote something similar to: “The joy and fulfillment of volunteering for a meaningful cause, and to make a difference,” or “Interest in a socially stimulating, environmental volunteer option with which to transition into an active retirement.” However, one respondent’s blunt response stood out among these responses: “I seek out opportunities to be active and not just contribute money.”

These statements highlight the ways in which the WSAs offer volunteers opportunities to be involved in direct, hands-on work, rather than joining a more passive “paper” membership of what Skocpol calls “mailing list adherents” (2003, 215). How might local environmental stewardship organisations like the WSAs be serving a special role in engaging environmental stewards who “want to make a difference” in person, rather than through their pocketbooks? In the section that follows, we present data from in-depth qualitative interviews to highlight how becoming involved in local environmental stewardship also provided WSA participants with a means of connecting to broader forms of civic participation in their communities.

**Environmental stewardship and civic engagement**

The group of respondents who participated in follow-up interviews is very similar to the larger sample of stewards who participated in the initial survey, where the majority of were female (54.5%), had a college or professional degree (81.5%), and were of late career/early retirement age (54.5). In exploring the motivations of participants through in-depth interviews, we find that participants were drawn to the WSAs based on a desire to improve their local environments and to take on leadership roles in their respective communities. Most of these motivations are comingled, and stewards often referred to several reasons and motivations for becoming involved with their WSAs. We find that, although there may not be an outright rejection the paper-membership model, WSA participants have a strong desire to take on active roles as leaders of environmental stewardship initiatives and within their communities more broadly.
Consistent with the mission of the WSAs, the promise of education and training in hands-on educational stewardship and community education was a primary appeal of the WSAs. In many cases, WSA participants indicated that they wanted to make a difference but were not aware of the avenues by which they could become involved. For example, Maureen, a woman in her early fifties who joined Anne Arundel County's WSA, recounted being very frustrated after one particular summer when the marina near her home in a waterfront community was closed due to high levels of bacteria several times over the summer. When she saw an advertisement for the WSA, she decided to enroll out of a desire to learn more about the problem in her watershed:

Well, initially I wanted to understand what was happening and if there was any way that I could help. I doubted if I could do anything or contribute anything valuable, so my goal was to learn and then to put any of what I learned to use.

Similar responses were common among respondents – they often described observing environmental problems in their communities, but not being sure what their options were to address those problems.

When participants learned of the WSAs, they recognised the potential of the stewardship training programmes to give them the tools they would need to address those problems. Lynn, who was a participant of the National Capital Region’s WSA, described her experience after attending the training course in 2012. Familiar with project management as part of her work in the non-profit sector, she became involved because, in her words:

I knew there were concerns about managing water in the DC area and making sure that the rivers get cleaner … so I thought it would be great to know some of the specifics and some tools so that instead of just worrying about it, you could do something about it.

Thus, the WSAs fulfilled a need for training and educational resources to provide concerned citizens like Lynn with concrete paths for action. Many stewards hoped that becoming more knowledgeable would allow them to be more involved in their communities and provide them with tools to engage their neighbours in environmental stewardship practices.

Another member of the National Capital Region WSA, Ben, was adamant about becoming involved in his community. When speaking of why he wanted to participate in the WSAs, he said:

Number one was just to get involved at this level, at the ground level, and get a project underway that I could get my hands dirty with … in my location … I could see it and manage it and get others involved. It was primarily about another way to get involved in the community.

Here, Ben is describing another goal that was common among interview respondents: many WSA participants saw the programmes as an opportunity to lead by example and engage their communities through projects in their own neighbourhoods. For many interview respondents, the WSA model presented an opportunity to engage their neighbours and respective communities through the projects they undertook as Master Watershed Stewards.

Maureen from the Anne Arundel WSA, whom we discussed above, began her work with the WSA to learn more about what she could do to ameliorate the high bacteria levels in her marina. As she went through the training, not only did she feel empowered to take action on her own, she transitioned to working as a community educator. She said that after the training she was able to serve as a resource to her neighbours:

I like to think that I’m making big strides. I know that change is slow and the damage is enormous. But more than the activities that we do … just the knowledge that is transferred to me, and from me to my neighbors is significant, more than I would have ever thought possible because at least in my neighborhood, everyone takes pride in our marina and the waterfront and say "Hey, you know if you put a rain barrel there to collect all of that nasty water coming off of your roof it would keep it from going into the bay?" And they’re on it. I know that it is unusual, I don’t think other neighborhoods are quite as receptive, but it’s … I think that the role of the Master Watershed Steward is growing.
Maureen was certainly not alone when it came to expressing the notion that the role of a master watershed steward empowers stewards to not only lead projects, but to lead their communities in environmental stewardship practices, both through outreach and by example.

Mark, who completed the training at Anne Arundel County’s WSA immediately after retiring, was adamant about his ability to speak with members of his community. According to Mark, the opportunity to learn about “… rain gardens, how they work, how to install them” led him to be able to engage with his neighbours. As part of the final project Mark completed for his Master Watershed Steward certification, he worked with other stewards from the programme to install two rain gardens in his front yard. Mark explained that the choice of the front yard was intentional, “everybody in my neighbourhood walks by my house. If I’m outside, people will stop and talk to me, and I particularly got a chance to talk to quite a number of people when we were constructing the rain gardens […] I got to engage a lot of my community that way.” By participating in this project, Mark not only had the chance to lead by example, but truly felt that he had become a credentialed leader who could help other homeowners in his community to take on similar projects. The opportunities afforded by the WSA, not only train volunteers and help them to conduct outreach, but also allow them to collaborate with other like-minded individuals to lead environmental stewardship initiatives in their communities.

Rick, a WSA participant from Anne Arundel county, moved to Maryland from another state where he had been active previously in environmental stewardship as part of a group of businesses that partnered with the National Wildlife Foundation. When he moved to Maryland, he was disappointed with the drastic difference in water quality from his previous state of residence, and he wanted to do something about the “filthy water”. However, he was also disappointed by the lack of opportunities to get involved:

… when I moved here, the physical organization on my river is the […] Riverkeepers, and [they] just wanted my money. [They] didn’t care about my concerns. [They] didn’t care about being involved in projects. [They] just wanted my money. And all the other organizations around here just want my money.

Frustrated by the inability to participate directly in cleaning up the river, Rick contested, “I want to be involved, I want to be a doer, I want to engage, and I want to enact change, and I knew I needed training to get to that point.” He saw the WSA in his area as a means of getting more involved and of gaining the tools and resources necessary to do so: “I got the training that I needed to become active and impactful. That was my goal and I definitely got that.” Drawing on his previous experience with environmental work, Rick was able to practice a new form of stewardship in his new home in Maryland. He describes how the WSAs presented an opportunity to network with other like-minded individuals who also wanted to take action:

[W]e have a lot of people that really, really care. And they’re in the middle of communities, and they’re talking and really having a conversation, and no other organization does that. No one’s had that kind of impact that they can motivate people … And in our watershed we’re dying a death by a thousand cuts, it’s no good to have a little organization bandaging up cut by cut. You need a thousand people working at the same time.

Rick effectively summarises, not just the appeal, but the mission of the WSA programme, which is to train stewards, to give them the tools to engage their neighbours in hands-on projects, and to build a network with others to affect environmental change. Part of this work, according to respondents, also meant relating their environmental stewardship to broader forms of civic engagement.

When considered in combination with our initial survey findings, our interviews demonstrate that WSA participants thought of their environmental stewardship as part of an appeal to becoming more involved in the political process, and that they saw themselves as a part of a larger network of people who could be mobilised to advocate for specific issues. Darla, a recent graduate from the Anne Arundel WSA, reflected on her work in her community as a Master Watershed Steward and recounted how her neighbours expected her to serve as a leader on storm water issues. She described the role of Master Watershed Steward as including “advocating for legislation” and “being active voices in policy
and legislation”, and described her own engagement with local government: “I’ve testified with the general assembly and the county council this year … it has served to keep me engaged.” Although WSA members become involved initially out of a desire to get their hands dirty and learn more about environmental issues, that work often leads them to take part in political advocacy. Echoing what Rick said above, this combination of stewardship, community engagement, and advocacy through which stewards are “[I]n the middle of communities, and they’re talking, and really having a conversation” makes these groups fairly unique. In Rick’s words, “no other organization does that”.

Our interviews provide more context and insights into the findings of our initial survey – participants of the WSA wanted to be directly involved in their communities, to engage in environmental stewardship to affect change in a way that existing civic organisations were not. Similar to the findings of Fisher and colleagues’ study of volunteer tree stewards in NYC (2015), we find that environmental stewardship serves as a means of civic engagement at the local level by providing citizens with a reason to engage their neighbours and communities. The WSAs’ tripartite goal of training, engagement and networking continues to attract new volunteers – people who want to be more involved at the local level – to participate in the WSA programmes. Our findings demonstrate how this model connects participants to their communities as volunteer stewards and environmental leaders, as well as serving as a gateway to other forms of civic engagement.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored how participation in local environmental stewardship organisations serves as an example of a countertrend to declining rates of civic engagement (Putnam 2000). We focus on organisations that train volunteers to become environmental stewards, providing them with the education and resources necessary to “make a difference” and become leaders in their communities. In stark contrast to the paper-membership model, organisations like the WSAs enrich local democracy – that is, diversify the forms of civic and democratic participation available to community members – by providing a broad range of opportunities for environmental engagement. The analysis presented here produces several promising contributions to sociological understandings of the relationship between civic engagement and environmental stewardship.

First and foremost, our survey results demonstrate that WSA participants are largely white, well educated and female, a finding that was not unexpected based on previous research on environmental organisations (see particularly Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 2003; see also Fisher, Campbell, and Svendsen 2012; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1999) and environmental activities more broadly (Jones 1998). It is worth noting that the WSAs were in the process of stepping up their efforts to reach out and recruit volunteers from church and faith-based organisations in order to diversify the demographics of their ranks. Although the final results of our research did not reflect those efforts, most of which were still in progress, future research on similar organisations that offer volunteers the opportunity to make a difference through a hands-on approach may lend support to Parker and McDonough’s (1999) assertion that minorities are more likely to participate if they feel they are more likely to make a difference (see also Arp and Kenny 1996). Furthermore, the opportunity to investigate purposeful outreach efforts would allow for the evaluation and contextualisation of previous research that found direct calls and requests for activity in voluntary organisations are an important part of successful mobilisation (Walker 2008).

Second, in line with previous research that demonstrates the positive association between civic engagement and environmental stewardship (Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015; Fisher and Galli 2016; Horton 2004; Portney 2005; Portney and Berry 2010; Weber 2000), the findings presented here show that training-based environmental organisations like the WSAs represent a countertrend to diminishing rates of civic engagement. Consistent with previous work that examines the relationship between these activities, environmental volunteers are more likely to be involved in the public square than the average citizen (Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015). Although the volunteers with whom we spoke may have individual goals for participating, their motivations are, at least in part,
driven by altruistic values (Wuthnow 1991, 1998). As previous research has demonstrated, many grassroots movements in the United States have been supported and sustained by individuals who have personalised political commitments (Lichterman 1996).

In contrast to other studies that have monitored the relationship between stewardship and civic engagement over time (Fisher, Svendsen, and Connolly 2015), this study does not provide evidence for the argument that being involved in environmental stewardship leads to other forms of civic engagement. Rather, we argue the WSAs and similar organisations exemplify the ways in which Americans are civically engaged in their communities through environmental stewardship and advocacy. The ways that participants perceive their engagement in the WSAs demonstrably contrasts with paper-membership models of civic engagement (Skocpol 2003), in which hands-on and face-to-face engagement is less common – both in their communities and how participants see their participation in environmental stewardship, which clearly contrasts with paper-membership models of civic engagement.

Moreover, the analysis of interview data reveals that organisations like the WSAs offer what a paper-membership cannot (Painter and Paxton 2014; Skocpol 2003): the opportunity to be trained, to network, and to become a community leader. Through the training of volunteers, these organisations give participants an in-depth, issue oriented education that enables them to become leaders in their communities and affords volunteers the opportunity to network with other like-minded and goal-oriented individuals. In sum, organisations like the WSAs are civically effective because they provide participants with the tools they need to become more engaged citizens. As part of a growing national movement, organisations like the WSAs serve as an example of a grassroots approach to civic engagement at the local level where volunteers are actively engaged with their neighbours and communities, not passively participating via their checkbooks or email inboxes.

Third, we suggest that the hybrid organisational structure of the WSAs is an important element of their success at the local level. As we have noted, hybrid organisational structures have the benefits of diversifying funding streams and weaving stewardship organisations into their local governments, business communities and social networks. These organisations fill in gaps in the environmental protection and restoration measures local and state governments are able to achieve (Shandas and Messer 2008). For example, projects carried out by Master Watershed Stewards reduce storm water runoff, curb pollution of the watershed, and help the state to reach mandates set by the Clean Water Act. These small-scale environmental restoration projects require large amounts of time, labour and resources, most often achieved through the hard work of volunteers and funded through private grants and donations. Although the lack of state support may be frustrating for some WSA participants, it is clear that citizens will continue to express concern about environmental problems in their communities and seek avenues through which to gain the tools and knowledge necessary to take action.

Finally, continuing to research the effectiveness of environmental organisations in terms of community outreach and mobilisation will also help researchers to understand successful mobilisation beyond the role of organisational leaders. As Andrews et al. demonstrate (2010), successful environmental organisations, and their ability to mobilise volunteers, are largely contingent on organisational leaders and their skills to manage their resources properly. Yet, environmental organisations that train and credential volunteers to lead grassroots campaigns themselves offer new pathways for civic organisations to be successful, as well as to mobilise future participants through graduates of those programmes. Although not addressed in the analysis here, it would certainly stand to reason that additional research on the ability to maintain an alumni network and leverage the strengths of individuals in those networks would help researchers develop new theories and methods for the study of civic and environmental organisations. In the same vein of evaluating efficacy, it would also be worthwhile for social scientists and ecologists alike to evaluate the environmental impacts of organisations like the WSAs, to determine what exactly is the ecological impact of this volunteer work (Grant and Vasi 2017; Locke et al. 2014; Romolini, Morgan Grove, and Locke 2013). Though, as pointed out in previous research, evaluating the ecological impacts of volunteer organisations and lay persons can prove difficult without sufficient documentation and resources (Close et al. 2016; Silva and Krasny 2016).
In conclusion, we believe that the citizen-steward training model adopted by the WSAs is a viable approach to addressing Skocpol’s observation that “yawning gaps have opened between local voluntary efforts and the professional advocates and grant makers who seek national influence” (2003, 231). Propelled by citizens’ desire to take action and make a difference, organisations like the WSAs are able to access, mobilise and train a corps of volunteers to address environmental problems at the local level. In doing so, these hybrid organisations offer an alternative to top-down strategies of state action on environmental issues at the same time that they provide opportunities for citizens to be environmentally and politically active in their communities.

Notes
5. This number was compiled using a web search. Search terms included “watershed stewards academy,” “watershed stewards program,” “watershed stewards project,” “watershed stewards,” “master watershed stewards” and “watershed stewards training”. Programs included are those providing in-person training and certification for adult volunteers on watershed-related issues and restoration/preservation techniques.
7. Although measuring the environmental effectiveness of the WSAs is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that research on the actual environmental outcomes of the WSA program is limited to-date (see Close et al. 2016 for details).
8. Cecil County, Maryland had started a new WSA, but their first cohort of stewards had not completed the training by the time this research was initiated (http://www.ccgov.org/news/mcsorley.cfm accessed February 19, 2015).
9. The National Capital Region WSA is based in Maryland, but also serves watersheds within the boundaries of Washington, DC. For more information, see http://www.anacostiaws.org/programs/education/watershed-stewards-academy (accessed January 4, 2016).
10. Survey data were collected in accordance with the Institutional Review Board requirements of the University of Maryland (protocol #598272-1).
11. Based on preliminary analysis of the data, the results from the three separate WSAs are consistent. Tests for the analysis of variance were not found to be statistically significant and/or did not meet the assumptions of the test and any conclusions drawn from them would not be valid. Therefore, we find that the best means of presentation for these data are in aggregate form.
12. Interview data were collected in accordance with the Institutional Review Board requirements of the University of Maryland (protocol #598272-2).
13. All respondents reported an age of 18 or older, which also complies with the Institutional Review Board protocol that all participants be 18 or older.

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