IV. Civic Education Programs

Civic Education Programs

Task Force on the Federal Election System
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Summary of conclusions

1. Americans' engagement in civic affairs is low and declining. Voter turnout dropped 15 percentage points between 1964 and 1996. The lowest levels of engagement are found among the youngest voters. Over two thirds of voters over 45, but only a third of voters under 25, cast ballots in 1996.

2. Scholars find only a small and indirect effect of participation in a civics curriculum on political involvement later in life. The possibility that exposure to civic education is elective, either by students or by school districts, complicates the assessment of its effect.

3. Several recent civic education curricula seem to hold promise. The most successful programs involve students—and occasionally their parents—directly in governmental processes, either through participation in mock elections or through cooperation and debate. So far, the evidence of their long-term impact on civic engagement in adulthood is limited. None appears likely to restore civic participation to the levels achieved a generation ago, but they may produce modest improvement.

By a variety of measures, the engagement of the American public in government and elections is low and declining. Public interest in public affairs "most of the time" averaged 35 percent from 1964 to 1976 but has not exceeded 30 percent even once ever since. Likewise, "very much" public interest in the current election campaign hovered around 36 percent from 1952 to 1976 but since has dropped under 30 percent, with the singular exception of 1996 (when it was 39 percent). Finally, as is well known, voter turnout has declined from 69.3 percent of the voting age population in 1964 to 54.2 percent in 1996.[1]

The lowest levels of engagement are found among the youngest voters. In 1996, the percentage of voters 70 and over who were interested in public affairs "most of the time," at 30 percent, was double the percentage of voters 37 and under who were interested most of the time, 14 percent. The percentage of the most senior voters who had "very much" interest in the current campaign, 38 percent, was more than double the percentage of the most junior voters who were very interested, 17 percent. Voter turnout among citizens aged 65 and over was 69.1 percent, but voter turnout among citizens 24 and younger was just 35.6 percent.

[1] The source for interest in public affairs and interest in the current campaign is the 1952 through 1996 American National Election Studies. The source for voter turnout is the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Report, Series P20–504, July 1998.

Voter turnout, by age, 1996

Age	Percent turnout of voting age citizen population
18 to 24 years	35.6
25 to 44 years	54.2
45 to 64 years	68.2
65 years or more	69.1

Source: Current Population Survey 1996 Voter Supplement

The two observations are connected. Interest in public affairs, interest in elections, and voter turnout have been lowest among young adults throughout postwar American history. Accordingly, a substantial part of the decline in interest and turnout in the electorate from the 1960s to the 1980s occurred because of the movement of the enormous postwar Baby Boom generation through the electorate (in Raymond Wolfinger's vivid phrase) "like a pig through a boa constrictor."[2] The connection may be still deeper. Several scholars have argued that civic engagement among the most recent generations is lower than civic engagement among older generations even at the same point in the life cycle, although others have disputed the claim.

Concern over low and declining civic participation in America has created a strong interest in civic education as a means of reversal. Advocates for greater civic education contend that basic civic knowledge is a precondition for effective participation, and that early practical experiences in civic life whet the appetite for sustained engagement into adulthood.

The best and largest study to date on civic engagement, by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, finds that formal instruction in civics plays, at best, a small and indirect role in fostering active citizenship. The effect of exposure to civics courses is dwarfed by the impact of educational attainment in general, and dwarfed as well by the effect of other demographic characteristics and other life experiences. Exposure to civics education does seem to foster attitudes that later promote political involvement, but civics education does not contribute directly to greater civic engagement in adulthood.

Even with this evidence, it is difficult to tell whether civics instruction per se contributes to greater political engagement in adulthood. If civics courses are optional, they will be taken as electives mostly by students who are already more interested in government and therefore already more likely to participate upon achieving the age of suffrage. Moreover, if civics curricula are offered by some school districts but not by others, the relationship between civics education and civic engagement may not reflect the impact of the curricula themselves but rather the effect of other characteristics of the communities that adopt them. Civics curricula, that is, may be just one manifestation of the community's broader interest in promoting the civic engagement of its young people. In this and other studies, the possibility that exposure to civic education is elective (either by school districts or by students themselves) complicates the assessment of the program's effect on civic engagement.

The Verba, Schlozman, and Brady study interviewed thousands of people who were exposed to hundreds of different kinds of civic education. A few recent studies have focused on particular civic education curricula. They suggest that three recent initiatives may hold particular promise.

[2] Using survey data from 1952 to 1996, Rosenstone and Hansen estimated that the younger electorate accounted for 2.7 percentage points of the 11.3 percentage point decline in voter turnout from the 1960s to the 1980s.

The "Kids Voting USA" curriculum originated in Arizona, and several communities across the nation have adapted it to their needs as well. Students research and discuss the issues and candidates leading up to an election, and then, on Election Day, actually cast replica ballots, oftentimes in real booths alongside the adults in the precincts serviced by their schools. One study on a diverse population in California found that the short and medium (6 month) term effects on political knowledge, interest, and motivation were quite substantial, and held across demographic groups.[3] Even more remarkable, the curriculum had a significant and positive effect on the attitudes and behavior of the students' *parents*, particularly among Latinos. One activity in the curriculum had students pose questions to their parents about their own views on political issues and their own experiences with politics. Parents' engagement with the curriculum through their children may well have raised their interest in politics and increased their knowledge of election practices.

The Center for Civic Education has developed another promising curriculum, "Project Citizen," which is based on ideas offered originally by John Dewey. In many ways it is similar to "Kids Voting USA." "Project Citizen," however, places more emphasis on engaging ongoing public policy questions, as opposed to getting ready for periodic elections. In addition, the general approach emphasizes cooperation and group involvement, rather than the friendly debate and individual decision making that is the focus of "Kids Voting USA." Research on the effectiveness of the curriculum is encouraging, demonstrating improvements in political knowledge, interest, and sense of effectiveness in politics.

Finally, some evidence suggests that well designed civic education courses that incorporate sustained and substantial amounts of "service learning" can significantly reinforce classroom based civics. Service learning is a form of community service that is designed to work in tandem with classroom work in furthering various learning objectives, for example, understanding the process of public administration. In addition to making book learning more vivid and relevant, students gain concrete skills to serve them later in life. What is more, advocates claim that service learning adds to the community's stock of "social capital." Since private forms of community service are one of the few types of social capital to have increased over the last several decades, advocates see integrated civics and service learning programs as an exciting opportunity to redirect such activities in an explicitly civic direction.

Unfortunately, the evidence on service learning suggests that short term and small scale programs have no effect. Participation must be sustained and substantial in addition to being tightly integrated with classroom activity. Thus, effective programs are resource intensive, and under current funding conditions are probably not practical as a widespread remedy for the decline in civic engagement. Nonetheless, where resources are available, service learning might be a valuable adjunct to traditional classroom-based civics.

Many more educators and scholars have put forth interesting programs and proposals to improve civic education. They have less empirical research to support them than those discussed above. In general, there is a dearth of reliable knowledge to indicate what works and what does not in civic education. While researchers and educators have collected the data, much of it cannot speak to the question of what actually causes increased civic engagement, and therefore, what would happen if we redirected resources and implemented policy changes. Many service learning courses, for example, are electives, making it difficult to tell whether the course had a real effect, or whether

[3] Martin Wattenberg tells us that his data show that young people who register to vote immediately upon turning 18 are more likely to turn out and remain registered than people who wait to register until later. Wattenberg's finding may suggest that programs to enroll high school students as voters at the time of graduation may be worthwhile. Or the finding may indicate that young people who are very interested in civic affairs just cannot wait to become registrants.

instead the students who enrolled were those who were going to become more engaged in politics anyway. If we changed the elective into a required course, we may see no change among the new, less motivated students.

Even more important, there currently is only thin evidence to assess the effects of civic education initiatives on civic involvement in adulthood. Given their recent vintage, very few programs have produced evidence of long term efficacy, which is the ultimate question of interest. Even the three programs discussed above cannot claim that when the students who participated in them become adults they will behave any differently from those of their peers who did not participate. Of course, such research takes time and it may prove that modern "best practices" are quite effective and will contribute to a resurgence of civic participation. Certainly it is worth the effort and resources to conduct such research on a large scale and in a rigorous way. For now, however, we should probably moderate our expectations. Better civic education may help to promote greater civic involvement, but it is unlikely to erase the decline in civic engagement that has occurred over the last generation.

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