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Is civics enough? High school civics education and young adult voter turnout

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ABSTRACT

Research on civic development in schools has identified a number of promising practices for increasing civic knowledge and interest among youth. This study examines the relationship between the most promising practices and increased political engagement as a young adult, using the likelihood of voting as a proxy. By assessing nationally representative survey data using a linear probability model, I explore whether youth who take civics in high school are more likely to vote as young adults. Results show a significant positive association between taking a civics course and extracurricular participation in high school, and likelihood of voting as a young adult, even after adjusting for other determinants of civics education and voter turnout. This paper explains the significance of these findings and makes the case for the importance of high school civic education and for further exploration of the factors involved in the process.

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Introduction

An underlying purpose of public education has always been to support the functioning of our society by creating informed and engaged citizens who contribute to the public good, in part through the democratic process (Dewey, 1916; Galston, 2001). Citizens, and especially participatory citizens, are necessary for democracy to function, and therefore public schools, as a state institution, have an interest in preparing youth for active citizenship (Galston, 2001). There are many ways to be an active and engaged citizen, but political scientists have typically defined active citizenship, or civic engagement, as possessing three key categories of engagement: political engagement, community participation, and public expression (Putnam, 2000; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). While both public expression and community participation are important to a thriving society, political engagement is more than important: it is necessary for the functioning of a democratic government. In the literature and here, political engagement refers to activities associated with elections such as voting, campaign involvement, and running for office (Levine, 2007; Putnam, 2000; Zukin et al., 2006). As the most widespread and easily recognizable form of political engagement, voter turnout serves as a useful measure by which to assess the health of our democracy and a specific subset of active citizenship. While voter turnout does not capture the whole picture of civic engagement in America, it is an important indicator of civic health and is often closely correlated with broader aspects of participatory citizenship including volunteering and community group membership, charitable giving and campaign donations, and political speech (Campbell, 2006). Although some recent research has suggested that youth participation may be moving away from traditional political engagement, voting remains an important indicator of the civic health of a democracy. When turnout falls, trust in public institutions and sense of electoral legitimacy fall, and

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overall political efficacy erodes. It is therefore important that we continue to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms that drive voting behavior.

Unfortunately, youth are not well represented among the American electorate, which has meaningful implications for how policy impacts and responds to the concerns of young people (Campbell, 2006; Leighley & Nagler, 2014). Voters under 30 register and vote at much lower rates than the general population; in 2014, only 47% of 18–24-year-olds were registered to vote, the lowest in 40 years (US Census Bureau, 2015). While it is difficult to know exactly how trends have changed over time, young people consistently have lower turnout rates than older citizens and appear to be underrepresented among voters (Leighley & Nagler, 2014; Teixeira, 1992). In a recent study on youth electoral engagement and informed voting, Kawashima-Ginsberg and Levine (2014b) indicate in their models that one of the most significant predictors of individual voting behavior for 18–24-year-olds is age. Youth who were old enough to have been eligible to vote in the previous national election, or 22–24 year-olds, were significantly more likely to vote than 18–21 year-olds, showing a time delay between when young people become eligible to vote, and when they begin to engage politically.

Young voters are crucial to ensuring that democracy is representative and that it is able to meet the needs of citizens of all ages, backgrounds, and stations. Who votes has important implications for national policy and the way that politicians respond to public opinion (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Leighley & Nagler, 2014). Low voter turnout and political participation reinforce inequality of political power and tends to exacerbate the plight of marginalized or traditionally underrepresented groups, including youth (Youniss, 2012). Young people are already underrepresented in public life, and historically have been disenfranchised in the political sphere. Increasing voter turnout among youth not only helps to increase representation across the entire electorate, but also helps to raise voter turnout among the entire population over time, since voting is habit-forming (Campbell, 2006; Plutzer, 2002). In our democratic system, developing an engaged electorate is a public good which education plays a part in providing. Schools, as public institutions with an interest in positive political socialization, have an important role to play in helping to close this civic engagement gap and supporting young people in their civic and political development (Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003).

There is some existing evidence to support the association between civic education in schools and the intent of children to vote. Adolescents who expect to vote are more likely to have learned about voting in school and to have greater political knowledge, to plan to go to college, and to have participated in student government (Maiello, Oser, & Biedermann, 2003; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). There is also an important relationship between intent to vote and the opportunity to discuss political issues and current events in an open classroom environment (Campbell, 2008; Maiello et al., 2003; Martens & Gainous, 2013). However, it is not clear that these findings are replicable or that they translate to actual adult voting behavior, since all of these studies draw upon the cross-sectional data collected in the 1999 IEA CivEd study. In order to build upon these findings, it is important to look for similar relationships across different samples and to begin to connect the intention to vote with actual voter turnout.

School curricula and civic instruction

Following from these results, one important way that schools can support increased voter turnout is by helping to improve civic learning and knowledge among adolescents (Niemi & Junn, 1998). Increased civic and political knowledge is associated with higher levels of civic and political engagement, including voting and the intent to vote (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Popkin & Dimock, 1999; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Direct civic education, therefore, leads to higher levels of political participation because it provides citizens with knowledge of their rights, the ability to make sense of political debates, and an understanding of their own interests and how these play out in policy and deliberation (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). Theory and evidence suggest, therefore, that those who understand the political system are more likely to participate in meaningful ways. As such, we expect to see that exposure to civic education in schools leads to a higher likelihood of voting as a result of improving overall civic knowledge.

The research literature in this area has identified five key promising practices for improving civic learning in schools, the first of which, not surprisingly, is instruction in civic content in the social studies curriculum (Gibson & Levine, 2003). For the purposes of this study, I consider direct instruction in civics to be a course in which the curriculum focuses on the functioning of American government and civil society and the role of citizens in a democratic system. Civic education of this nature has always been part of the American classroom, but its relationship to student outcomes has not always been clear. Early findings of Langton and Jennings (1968) based on the Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study suggested that civic education was not strongly related to political knowledge among high school students, and as a result the conventional wisdom was for a long time that civic education didn't impact civic outcomes, at least in the form of direct instruction (Galston, 2001). As a result, the literature generally turned its focus to how the quality of such education could be improved so that it would have a meaningful impact. However, more recent research has been able to find significant effects of civics coursework and instruction on civic knowledge among adolescents. In their extensive analysis of the 1988 NAEP civics assessment, Niemi and Junn (1998) found that civics coursework had a significant effect on student achievement on civics assessments, increasing scores by 4% alone, and by 11% when that coursework included regular discussion of current events. Torney-Purta (2002) also found evidence in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) CivEd study that studying civics topics in school leads to higher levels of civic knowledge and engagement. Gimpel et al. (2003) found that exposure to civics courses was associated with

higher levels of political discussion, factual political knowledge, and internal political efficacy, even after adjusting for selection factors such as how much students enjoyed or were interested in the classes.

There is evidence that these effects are most significant among low-socioeconomic and racial minority populations, and that civics instruction helps to reduce gaps in political knowledge between these subgroups and allows voters to align candidate preference and party identification with their beliefs and attitudes about specific issues (Gimpel et al., 2003; Meirick & Wackman, 2004). Unfortunately, in recent years, the rise of high-stakes school accountability and standardized testing has often led to a narrowing of the curriculum, and civics has received less classroom time in many states (Levine, Lopez, & Marcelo, 2008). Some states do still require civics as a high school graduation requirement, and among states that do not, individual schools vary in their requirements and course offerings, leading to meaningful differentiation in civics course taking patterns among students.

In addition to the importance of teaching civics curriculum, the quality of social studies and civics education and the manner in which it is delivered has also been shown to matter a great deal (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). As such, the second promising practice for civic learning is classroom discussion of current events. As discussed above, Niemi and Junn (1998) made the early finding that including regular discussion of current events significantly improved performance on the NAEP civics assessment, and other findings have supported this result in the decades since. More generally, regular, open, and well-moderated discussion of current events has been shown to have a significant impact on student civic knowledge, appreciation of diverse viewpoints, and acceptance of the democratic process (Avery, 2010; Hemmings, 2000; Hess, 2002, 2009; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, & Thiede, 2000; Mutz, 2006; Niemi & Niemi, 2007; Parker, 2006; Simon, 2001). Most significantly, Campbell (2008) found not only that an open classroom environment, or one where there is both regular discussion of current issues and also a climate of respect for political differences, increases political knowledge; it also fosters intention to be an informed voter. This is one of the strongest findings to date which supports the impact of classroom discussion on political outcomes. Therefore, we expect that social studies classes with a focus on discussing current events, whether or not they are explicitly civics courses, will lead to increases in voter turnout.

Extracurricular civic education

Students also experience civic learning outside of the classroom, and these experiences are also associated with political engagement later in life. One of the most common ways students engage with civil society during high school is through volunteer experiences, the third promising practice. Service learning, community service, or volunteering is often a part of the high school experience, whether or not it is required by the school for graduation. Studies have shown that participating in a service experience in high school is a strong predictor of social, civic, and political engagement later in life (Campbell, 2006; Gibson & Levine, 2003; Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Perry & Katula, 2001; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999). Yates (1999) theorizes that service learning experiences are a crucial part of adolescent identity formation as civic and political actors, increasing a sense of efficacy and a helping youth develop a realistic assessment of issues and how they might have an impact. Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) found that students who participated in service learning in high school were significantly more likely to say that they intended to vote, which again suggests that these experiences not only impact civic learning, but that they may also carry forward to influence political engagement behavior later in life.

Participation in extracurricular activities is the fourth promising practice for civic learning. Extracurricular group participation is also associated with political engagement in adults (Kirlin, 2003). Students who participate in extracurricular groups become habitually connected to civic group participation and connected to politically engaged cultures, both of which socialize them toward voting (Thomas & McFarland, 2010). Both what kind of groups and how many they join appear to have an impact. Those who join more groups tend to be more engaged later in life, perhaps because they are habituated into regular and broad participation (Glanville, 1999; Lindsay, 1984; McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Those participating in groups that have “a collective goal beyond individual participation,” typically with a social or political focus, have the highest levels of political engagement later in life (Kirlin, 2003, p. 15). Some extracurricular activities of this nature, such as student government, have also been associated with intent to vote (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). While there does tend to be a strong association between extracurricular activity and political activity in young adulthood, very little causal evidence, or even studies that account meaningfully for self-selection, exists. Nevertheless, group participation remains an important adolescent predictor of adult political engagement.

Finally, the democratic nature of the school itself plays an important role in the political socialization of students. The final promising practice for civic learning is a democratic school climate. For many young people, the school is their first interaction with a government agency, and whether they perceive the institution as fair and equitable and believe that they have a say in its governance has a significant impact on how they interact with state institutions as they age (Campbell, 2006; Dávila & Mora, 2007; Gimpel et al., 2003). Gimpel et al. (2003) find evidence among high school students in a diverse set of Maryland public schools that students who believed school authorities were unfair were more likely to exhibit negativity toward courts and police and harbored less nationalistic sentiment. In general, the school climate serves to influence students' perceptions of fairness in the broader system of public institutions and the world more generally (Gibson & Levine, 2003). This in turn affects their sense of efficacy and therefore their likelihood to vote, based on whether they believe it might have an impact (Gimpel et al., 2003).

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Variable	Category	Proportion
Gender	Male	0.518
	Female	0.482
Race	White	0.552
	Black	0.186
	Hispanic	0.180
	Asian	0.038
	Other/multiracial	0.048
Ideology	Conservative	0.272
	Liberal	0.265
	Moderate/other/none	0.463
Educational status	Currently enrolled	0.507
	Completed post-secondary degree	0.127
	Not in school but plans to return	0.254
	Not in school, no plans to return	0.111
Employment	Full time	0.365
	Part time	0.293
	Unemployed, full time student	0.215
	Unemployed, not in school	0.127
Party identification	Democrat	0.377
	Republican	0.209
	Independent	0.287
	Other/none	0.128

$n = 4101$.

This paper seeks to explore to what extent these five civic education experiences in high school – direct civic instruction, regular discussion of current events, service learning, extracurricular participation, and school democratic climate – are associated with increased probability of voting among young adults. Using a nationally representative survey of 18–24-year-old Americans, I expect to find evidence that both in and out of classroom experiences have a positive relationship with likelihood of voting, and that these experiences have individual effects and are not dependent on the presence of the other factors to manifest.

Methods

Sample

The Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge Youth Post-Election Survey 2012 was conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University and Universal Survey, Inc. beginning the day after the 2012 national election and continuing for six weeks until the complete sample of 4483 respondents, aged 18–24, had been collected (Levine, 2016). The survey contained 90 questions total and used three forms, each of which contained 45 core survey questions and 30 additional questions representing two of three “blocks” of the other 45 survey questions. As a result, each respondent answered 75 of the 90 questions included in the survey. Previous studies with this dataset that predict voter turnout have considered the role of state-level policies or high school diversity in influencing voter turnout among youth (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2014a, 2014b). This study focuses on individual experiences of civic education, instead of state- or school-level contextual effects.

The analytic sample for this study includes the subset of respondents for whom we had at least basic demographic data and who were not missing more than 20% of the responses for their survey form. Characteristics of these 4101 respondents are described in Table 1. The sample includes young people between the ages of 18–24 at the time of the interview, with a mean age of 21.25 and a standard deviation of 2.03. Overall, this analytic sample is subject to some non-random attrition due to these inclusion criteria, but when compared to the complete, nationally representative random sample of 4483 young people, there are no significant demographic differences. In addition, respondents tend to be minimally biased toward voters, since 60.8% of the analytic sample reported voting, and actual turnout among 18–24 year olds in the 2012 presidential election is estimated at about 48% (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2014b). This is common, since people who have a propensity toward voting are also more likely to take and complete a survey, and people often say they voted even if they did not. All voter surveys over-report what we can find about actual vote totals,¹ and compared to other self-reported

survey measures this is not unusually high (Morgan & Lee, 2017). However, this means that our sample is not truly generalizable to 18–24 year olds nationally, and may slightly over-represent pro-social youth relative to the population as a whole.

Missing data

This study includes structural missing data as a function of the ballot design of the survey. Each respondent was missing between 2 and 6 variables used in the analysis as a result of which survey form they received. Additionally, approximately 37% of respondents were also missing up to 20% of other response variables. Missing values were imputed using the MICE package in R. MICE conducts multiple imputation using chained equations, a fully conditional specification approach which specifies the model for imputation individually for each variable according to a set of conditional densities (van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011).

Measures

Voter turnout

This is a dichotomous variable representing whether or not the respondent self-reported voting in the 2012 election. Sixty percent of respondents in the sample self-identified as having voted. While this may not be a perfect measure of voting behavior, as discussed above, it does provide a measure of whether respondents see voting as a social good, value the democratic system, and care about outcome of the election (Campbell, 2006; Morgan & Lee, 2017).

Independent variables

The five promising practices for civic learning are included in the model as independent, or explanatory, variables.

Civic instruction. This is a dichotomous indicator variable representing whether or not the respondent recalled taking a civics (or similar) course in high school. Specifically, respondents were asked “In high school, did you take a course called something like civics, American government, or government?”.

Current events. This is a dichotomous indicator variable representing whether respondents felt their high school social studies instruction was focused on the discussion of current events. Respondents coded as 1 selected “issues or problems facing our country today” when asked “When you think about your social studies teachers in high school in general, what would you say they emphasized most: the Constitution or the U.S. system of government and how it works, great events and heroes from the past, or issues and problems facing our country today?”.

Service learning. This is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent reported doing a service project in high school. This includes service projects both in and outside of class time, which may include formal service learning or volunteering more generally.

Extracurricular participation. This construct is measured using two variables. The first is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent participated in any group that had a socially or politically conscious focus during high school, either in school or in their broader community (such as participating in a church group or scout troop). The second measures the extent of their participation, and is a count variable for the number of extracurricular groups to which they belonged, ranging from zero to four.

School governance. This is a composite variable measuring the perceived democratic climate at the respondents’ high school as an average score from one to five across four indicators, specifically whether “students had a say in how the high school was run,” whether “in general, students could disagree with teachers, if they were respectful,” or “were encouraged to express their opinions,” and whether “students felt like they were part of a community where people cared about each other.” This set of questions was not designed as a scale to measure a single latent construct of perceived school climate, but instead represents a set of indicators that point to a desirable perception of school democratic practices. Nevertheless, the internal consistency of the measure is 0.62, quite close to the minimum cutoff of 0.70.

Covariates

Additional factors that have been shown to influence voter turnout were included in the model as covariates. The first of these variables are simple demographic indicators such as race, gender, and age (which is included as a bivariate indicator where 1 indicates being old enough to have been eligible to vote in the previous election). Other included demographic indicators include measures of socioeconomic status (SES) and educational progress, as well as religious affiliation, parent encouragement, and whether they attended a racially diverse high school.

Socioeconomic status. SES is a composite measure of three indicators widely accepted in the literature to be reliable measures of socioeconomic background. These include maternal educational attainment, number of books in the home, and whether the respondent's family received a daily newspaper subscription while they were in high school. This measure was converted to a z-score, so SES is evaluated relative to the rest of the sample.

Educational status. Because the target population, 18–24 year olds, are likely to still be in school and have very different levels of attainment, the first variable measures educational progress as opposed to attainment, where scores are calculated as deviation from the age-specific mean of educational attainment (Levine, 2012). Higher scores mean that the respondent has completed more education relative to participants of the same age.

Religious affiliation. This is an indicator variable for whether the survey respondent reports taking part in a religious congregation, either since completing high school or currently for the small portion of the sample that was enrolled in high school.

Parent encouragement. This is an additive index of whether the respondent's parents created a politically informed and engaged home environment based on responses to survey questions about whether the respondent's parents encouraged them to vote, whether their parents discussed politics at home, and whether the respondent was encouraged to express their own opinions about such matters, even if they were different from their parents' opinions.

High school diversity. Existing research suggests that attending a diverse high school may actually discourage civic participation because it can be difficult to raise controversial issues when one does not feel empowered by the presence of peer solidarity and social norms (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000; Campbell, 2007; Jacobsen, Frankenberg, & Lenhoff, 2012; Levinson, 2012). This analysis therefore includes an indicator variable for respondents who attended a high school that did not have a clear racial majority group.

Finally, the local political context of the state in which one votes is generally considered to have an effect on turnout, especially in the United States under the electoral college. In previous work with this dataset, Kawashima-Ginsberg and Levine (2014b) explore a number of state contextual factors and election policies in relation to young voter turnout. While the purpose of this paper is not to explore the influence of state policy on voting behavior, local context does play a role in influencing both educational experiences and likelihood of voting. I address this association by adjusting for state competitiveness, and this relationship is discussed in more detail below.

Statistical models

This paper uses a linear probability model (LPM) to estimate the likelihood of voting as a function of the constructs discussed above. While it is possible for an LPM to predict probabilities greater than 1 and less than 0 for some combination of explanatory variable values, in this case the constrained nature of most of the measures means that the majority of the data falls close to the mean of the explanatory variables. This approach also makes the reported coefficients much easier to interpret and compare, since they are directly interpretable as the percent change in probability of voting (Wooldridge, 2012). This analysis uses robust standard errors to account for the heteroskedasticity inherent in the model. For comparison, I also estimated logit models for each of the models discussed below. This did not alter the results.²

I first consider the role of state political climate in relation to both the likelihood of having taken civics in high school, as well as voter turnout. I next present models assessing each of the five explanatory variables independently, and then a final model that includes all of them together.

Results

While this paper focuses on the association between high school civic education experiences and voter turnout, it is important to consider the contextual role of state political climate as a factor in determining both the nature of high school experiences and voting behavior. States that have a diverse and contentious political atmosphere are saturated with political

Table 2

State education policy in 2012 by competitiveness.

	Battleground state	Uncontested state
Civics requirement	9	27
No civics requirement	1	14

n = 51 (50 states and District of Columbia).

Table 3

Voter turnout by state competitiveness and civics course taking.

	Battleground state	Not battleground state
Took civics	66.5%	61.0%
Did not take civics	54.5%	50.0%

n = 4101.

Table 4

Baseline LPM estimates of relationship between voter turnout and determinates.

Independent Variable	Estimated Coefficient	Robust Standard Error	t-statistic
Took civics	0.116***	0.021	5.561
Discussion of Current Events	-0.015	0.018	-0.864
HS Service project	0.071***	0.015	4.639
HS Democratic climate	0.020*	0.009	2.091
Number of HS groups	0.051***	0.005	9.874
HS Social/political group	0.094***	0.016	5.773

Note: number of groups and social/political group indicator were run in the same model.

n = 4101.

* p < 0.05

*** p < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

Table 5

Linear probability models estimating voter turnout as a function of individual civic education experiences, with adjustments for individual and environmental characteristics.

Independent Variable	1	2	3	4	5
Intercept	0.362*** (0.026)	0.404*** (0.021)	0.396*** (0.022)	0.397*** (0.037)	0.355*** (0.022)
Took civics	0.054** (0.020)				
Discussion of Current Events		-0.003 (0.017)			
HS Service project			0.019 (0.015)		
HS Democratic climate				0.002 (0.009)	
Number of HS groups					0.024*** (0.005)
HS Social/political group					0.063*** (0.016)
Black	0.132*** (0.019)	0.133*** (0.019)	0.123*** (0.019)	0.134*** (0.019)	0.134*** (0.019)
Hispanic	-0.013 (0.021)	-0.012 (0.021)	-0.014 (0.021)	-0.012 (0.021)	-0.012 (0.021)
Asian	0.017 (0.039)	0.016 (0.039)	0.012 (0.039)	0.016 (0.038)	0.005 (0.038)
Male	-0.034* (0.014)	-0.034* (0.014)	-0.034* (0.014)	-0.034* (0.014)	-0.027 (0.014)
Age (1 = eligible to vote in last election)	0.086*** (0.014)	0.085*** (0.014)	0.085*** (0.014)	0.086*** (0.014)	0.086*** (0.014)
Socioeconomic Status	0.012** (0.004)	0.013** (0.004)	0.012** (0.004)	0.013** (0.004)	0.009* (0.004)
Relative educational progress	0.079*** (0.008)	0.081*** (0.008)	0.080*** (0.008)	0.081*** (0.008)	0.074*** (0.008)
Religious participation	0.044** (0.015)	0.044** (0.015)	0.042** (0.015)	0.044** (0.015)	0.030* (0.015)
Parent encouragement	0.099*** (0.009)	0.101*** (0.009)	0.101*** (0.009)	0.100*** (0.009)	0.093*** (0.009)
Diverse HS	-0.071*** (0.016)	-0.072*** (0.016)	-0.073*** (0.016)	-0.072*** (0.016)	-0.069*** (0.016)
Battleground state	0.051*** (0.015)	0.053*** (0.015)	0.053*** (0.015)	0.053*** (0.015)	0.056*** (0.015)
Adjusted R2	0.127	0.126	0.126	0.126	0.136

Coefficients shown for each independent variable, robust standard errors listed in parentheses.

n = 4101.

* p < 0.05.

** p < 0.01.

*** p < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

media, and it would make sense for this to impact both high school experiences as well as overall turnout in these states. I therefore examine the underlying relationships between political environment, civic education, and voter turnout before turning to more fully developed models.

As expected, living in a battleground state (in this case, any state that was coded as “leaning republican,” “leaning democrat,” or “complete toss-up” in the lead up to the 2012 election) does have a notable correlation with state education

Table 6

Estimated linear probability model: voter turnout as a function of high school civic education experiences, with adjustments for individual and environmental characteristics.

Independent Variable	Estimated Coefficient	Robust Standard Error	t-statistic
Intercept	0.322***	0.040	8.033
Took civics	0.046*	0.020	2.333
Discussion of Current Events	-0.013	0.017	-0.770
HS Service project	-0.011	0.015	-0.698
HS Democratic climate	0.001	0.009	0.139
Number of HS groups	0.024***	0.005	4.349
HS Social/political group	0.065***	0.016	4.137
Black	0.123***	0.019	6.832
Hispanic	-0.012	0.021	-0.556
Asian	0.008	0.038	0.201
Male	-0.027	0.014	-1.854
Age (1 = eligible to vote in last election)	0.086***	0.014	5.972
Socioeconomic Status	0.009*	0.004	2.180
Relative educational progress	0.072***	0.008	9.392
Religious participation	0.031*	0.015	2.039
Parent encouragement	0.091***	0.009	10.462
Diverse HS	-0.068***	0.016	-4.335
Battleground state	0.055	0.015	3.558
Adjusted R2	0.136		

$n = 4101$.

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

policy requiring civics courses. As we see in Table 2, 90% of battleground states required civics in 2012, while only 68% of uncontested states required civics. This shows a propensity toward requiring civics in states that are politically contested at the national level.

Even in states where civics is not required, many schools individually require civics, or students opt in for a variety of reasons. About 86% of survey respondents in battleground states self-reported taking civics, while 82% of respondents in non-battleground states did. This difference is significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Voter turnout rates are also higher overall in battleground states and among those to take civics. Within battleground states, 66.5% of youth who took civics reported voting, whereas only 54.5% of those who did not take civics reported voting. In uncontested states, turnout among students who took civics was 61%, and only 50% of those who did not take civics reported voting. Not only is overall turnout higher in battleground states, but the gap between those who did and did not take civics is also slightly larger. These findings are summarized in Table 3.

Next, I turn to the relationships between individual civic education experiences and voting. Table 4 shows the baseline estimates for the relationship between each of the five promising practices for civic learning and likelihood of voting. Most notably, taking civics in high school is associated with an 11.6% increase in the likelihood of voting as a young adult. There are also significant relationships between service learning, high school democratic climate, and high school group participation and voting. This suggests that, in keeping with findings from throughout the literature, individual experiences of civic learning in high school are associated with increased voter turnout in young adulthood.

In this sample, discussion of current events is not strongly related to voter turnout, which is unexpected in relation to the broad literature in this area. It seems likely that this is due to the way this question was posed, which asked respondents to indicate the primary focus of their social studies instruction from among a variety of options. This variable indicates those who said current events was the primary focus of their coursework, and as a result does not account for those who may have been exposed to discussion of current events as a secondary or tertiary focus of social studies or who were exposed to current events elsewhere in the curriculum, nor does it account for whether or not such discussions occurred in an open classroom environment. In addition, this represents only a very small proportion of the sample, making it difficult to accurately estimate the effect.

Knowing, then, that political climate has a significant positive relationship both with the likelihood of taking civics and of voting, the question is whether the relationship between civics education and voter turnout remains significant event after adjusting for a variety of selection effects, including political climate.

As shown in Table 5, some civic learning experiences do remain significant predictors of voter turnout even after adjusting for a broad variety of covariates. Both classroom and non-classroom civic learning experiences are shown to have a positive association with likelihood of voting, but these associations vary in strength and magnitude across the five

educational strategies outlined above. Within the classroom, having taken a civics course in high school is associated with a 5.4% increase in the likelihood of voting. This is quite substantial relative to national voter turnout rates, which have not tended to fluctuate more than 5–10% from year to year (McDonald, 2014). Looking at the standard error, we expect the true effect could be as large as 7% or as low as 4%. Even if it is on the small end, this is a large enough magnitude to be a meaningful indicator of turnout among young voters. Discussion of current events is not a significant predictor of voting behavior for this sample.

Outside of the classroom, extracurricular participation is the strongest predictor of voting behavior among young adults, with both the number and type of groups having a positive association with voting likelihood. For each additional group a young person belonged to, their predicted likelihood of voting increases by 2.4%, and specifically belonging to a group with a socially or politically conscious focus increases probability of voting by 6.3%. Again, looking at the magnitude of these coefficient estimates, it is clear that extracurricular participation in high school is a meaningful predictor voter turnout rates. Service projects and school democratic climate are not strong predictors of voting behavior in this sample after adjusting for other factors, and do not have significant effects. The nature of the survey data may play a role in this finding as well. Much of the literature on high school service experiences has focused on service learning in an academic context, which involves key components such as reflection. This question measures service projects more broadly, which may not require such cultivated learning experiences or encourage the same outcomes (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). As such, the lack of a demonstrated association here may be due to the nature of the question, not to a lack of association between service learning and likelihood of voting. However, these findings do demonstrate that both in and out of classroom civic education experiences are significant predictors of young adult voting behavior, specifically civics course taking within the classroom and extracurricular participation outside of the classroom.

In Table 6, we see that when we include all five measures of high school civic education experiences in the model at once, these associations hold. The magnitude of the effect of taking civics drops slightly to 4.6%, but remains significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. The effects of extracurricular group participation remain the same, and discussion of current events, service learning, and high school democratic climate remain insignificant. This shows that the associations with voting found for each experience have individual effects and are not significantly altered after accounting for the other four explanatory variables.

It is also important to note that group participation seems to be related to the association between several other factors and voting behavior. We see a notable drop in the magnitude and significance of religious participation, socioeconomic status, and gender in the models that include extracurricular group membership relative to the models that do not, both when it is included as the sole explanatory variables and in the final model. This is an interesting result that merits further investigation. Certainly it supports the previous literature in suggesting that most extracurricular participants come from families with higher socioeconomic status but that extracurricular participation predicts adult participation beyond its correlation with SES (Kirlin, 2003). The interactions between extracurricular activities and SES as they relate to gender and religiosity require further study.

Discussion

These findings are a new attempt to show an association that has not been sufficiently examined in the past, and the results are in line with much of the existing theory and literature in the area. In re-examining a widely accepted set of practices for civic education developed by Gibson and Levine (2003) and continued by Jonathan, Levine, McConnell, and Smith (2011), we find that both in- and out-of-classroom educational civics experiences are associated with youth voter turnout, but find stronger evidence for some than others. This builds on existing literature, grounded in the breakthrough findings of Niemi and Junn (1998), in showing that civic education does make a difference for students and making a case for the importance of formal civics instruction in high school on a national scale. As the curriculum has narrowed in response to increased testing and accountability, civics has often been the first area of social studies to disappear. However, this study suggests that taking a civics course in high school does have an association with political engagement, specifically the likelihood of voting, later in life, and therefore is an important component of education for democracy. As with all observational data, we cannot know for certain that there are not unobserved determinates of both voter turnout and taking civics class. Theory would suggest that there are probably are some unobserved confounding factors to this relationship for which this analysis unable to adjust. Nonetheless, it is important to continue to build evidence on this question, and these findings suggest that the case for there being an effect of civics course taking on voter turnout is stronger than the case that there is not. As such, in the interest of supporting and preserving our democratic system, we should err on the side of providing more, not less, civic education, especially in times of increased political polarization and uncertainty that one might argue we are experiencing today.

This analysis goes beyond existing work that asks students about their intent to vote as adults, and instead links adult voting to their recall of high school experiences. While neither approach is able to compare observed behaviors in both adolescence and adulthood, the fact that many of the same patterns emerge does suggest a positive correlation between youth intent to vote and actual turnout as young adults. That these results mirror the literature on intent to vote, especially Torney-Purta et al.'s (2001) work with the 1999 IEA CivEd data, helps to validate voting intention as a measure of future political engagement among minors. However, while this is able to support general findings about voting intentions, it is limited to the U.S. context, and further work could expand validation on an international scale.

In addition, extracurricular activities appear to have strong ties to adult voting behavior, which supports existing literature in this area, but there is a need to open the “black box” of these relationships and begin to tease out the mechanisms by which group participation might influence voting behavior (Beck & Jennings, 1982; Kirlin, 2003; Verba, Lehman Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). This is especially true in beginning to better understand the connections between extracurricular groups and voting in relation to religiosity, gender and socioeconomic status, and the ways in which these factors are connected to the characteristics of group makeup and specific activities in which groups partake. These relationships are complex and interrelated, and further research is needed that can begin to untangle issues of self-selection and voter propensity (Glanville, 1999; Kirlin, 2003; Perks & Haan, 2011). Regardless of the mechanisms at play, however, extracurricular groups appear to play an important role in student socialization and civic development, and public schools should be provided with the necessary funding and support to make a strong extracurricular program a reality for as many students as are interested.

That there is no evidence of an association between discussion of current events and voter turnout is both counterintuitive and somewhat of a departure from previous literature in this area, which suggests an important role for discussion in an open classroom climate (Alivernini & Manganelli, 2011; Campbell, 2008; Gibson & Levine, 2003; Jonathan et al., 2011; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). However, a closer look at some previous studies reveals that this is not an entirely new result. For example, Martens and Gainous (2013) find that debate is not part of the factor pointing to open classrooms, and Kawashima-Ginsberg and Levine (2014a) find in these same data that discussion of current events and controversial issues do not have a significant main effect outside of their interaction with diversity. This is important preliminary evidence that classroom discussion may not be the core mechanism by which open classroom climate impacts student outcomes, and certainly merits further exploration.

In order to better understand the underlying relationship between voting and civics education, we should consider new designs and methods of collecting data to explore the most likely unobserved selection effects that I was unable to account for in this analysis. Additionally, some of the limitations associated with cross-sectional survey data including problems of recall bias could be addressed through longitudinal studies. Self-report in surveys carries with it some additional problems for validity. In addition to the over-report of voting as discussed above, there may also be a bias toward people who are more civically engaged remembering more civics experiences from the past because they enjoyed these experiences or were otherwise more interested in them. They may also over-report as a result of social desirability when it becomes clear that the survey is interested in their civic education experiences. This could result in data that show a stronger correlation between high school civics and voting than is actually present. While this is symptomatic of all survey data, it does limit the strength these results. Researchers should also look for state and local comparisons and patterns of course taking in the form of curriculum policies and standards in hopes of connecting real changes in civics course-taking or extracurricular patterns to changes in youth voting behavior.

This study suggests that efforts to expand and improve opportunities for civic education earlier in life may have far reaching effects on voter turnout in the long run. By preparing students early to be engaged citizens, we can empower the upcoming generation and build a responsible, democratic and sustainable electorate, ensuring the health of our democracy for years to come.

Notes

- 1) The United States Election Project, maintained by Michael MacDonald, estimates a national turnout of 58.6% in the 2012 general election. See <http://www.electproject.org>.
- 2) For a complete set of tables showing average marginal effects from the logit models, see [Appendix](#).

All data used for this paper is publicly available online via the University of Michigan ICPSR database. This dataset can be retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR35012.v2>.

Appendix: Logit models

See Tables 5a and 6a.

Table 5a

Average marginal effects of individual civic education experiences on voter turnout, with adjustments for individual and environmental characteristics.

Independent Variable	1	2	3	4	5
Took civics	0.052** (0.019)				
Discussion of Current Events		-0.003 (0.017)			
HS Service project			0.019 (0.015)		
HS Democratic climate				0.002 (0.009)	
Number of HS groups					0.023*** (0.005)
HS Social/political group					0.065*** (0.016)
Black	0.134*** (0.020)	0.136*** (0.020)	0.135*** (0.020)	0.136*** (0.020)	0.135*** (0.020)
Hispanic	-0.009 (0.020)	-0.008 (0.020)	-0.010 (0.020)	-0.008 (0.020)	-0.009 (0.020)
Asian	0.018 (0.037)	0.017 (0.037)	0.013 (0.038)	0.017 (0.038)	0.006 (0.037)
Male	-0.035* (0.014)	-0.034* (0.014)	-0.035* (0.014)	-0.035* (0.014)	-0.028 (0.014)
Age (1 = eligible to vote in last election)	0.086*** (0.014)	0.085*** (0.014)	0.085*** (0.014)	0.086*** (0.014)	0.086*** (0.014)
Socioeconomic Status	0.012** (0.004)	0.012** (0.004)	0.012** (0.004)	0.012** (0.004)	0.008* (0.004)
Relative educational progress	0.077*** (0.007)	0.078*** (0.007)	0.077*** (0.007)	0.078*** (0.007)	0.071*** (0.007)
Religious participation	0.043** (0.015)	0.043** (0.015)	0.041** (0.015)	0.043** (0.015)	0.029 (0.015)
Parent encouragement	0.097*** (0.008)	0.098*** (0.008)	0.098*** (0.008)	0.098*** (0.008)	0.090*** (0.008)
Diverse HS	-0.070*** (0.015)	-0.071*** (0.015)	-0.071*** (0.015)	-0.071*** (0.015)	-0.068*** (0.015)
Battleground state	0.051** (0.016)	0.053*** (0.016)	0.053*** (0.016)	0.053*** (0.016)	0.056*** (0.016)

Average marginal effects estimated from logit models shown for each independent variable, standard errors listed in parentheses.

$n = 4101$.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 6a

Estimated average marginal effects: logit model of voter turnout as a function of high school civic education experiences, with adjustments for individual and environmental characteristics.

Independent Variable	Average Marginal Effect	Standard Error	z-statistic
Took civics	0.044*	0.019	2.336
Discussion of Current Events	-0.013	0.017	-0.780
HS Service project	-0.011	0.015	-0.711
HS Democratic climate	0.001	0.009	0.096
Number of HS groups	0.023***	0.005	4.369
HS Social/political group	0.067***	0.016	4.194
Black	0.135***	0.020	6.731
Hispanic	-0.008	0.020	-0.416
Asian	0.008	0.038	0.224
Male	-0.028	0.014	-1.932
Age (1 = eligible to vote in last election)	0.086***	0.014	6.069
Socioeconomic Status	0.008*	0.004	2.078
Relative educational progress	0.070***	0.007	9.662
Religious participation	0.030*	0.015	1.963
Parent encouragement	0.089***	0.084	10.591
Diverse HS	-0.067***	0.015	-4.421
Battleground state	0.055***	0.016	3.511

$n = 4101$.

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

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