

Research Fact Sheet

The Impact of K–12 Civic Education on Political Participation and Voting in an Era of Political Polarization

Practiced participation in democratic processes and voting at early ages have life-long consequences for civic engagement. The acquisition of knowledge as well as hands-on exposure in civics courses and extracurricular opportunities foster the development of civic skills and heightened consideration of political issues, comprehension of the perspectives of others, and attraction to collective decision making. Civic education is associated long-term with political participation, voter turnout, and informed voting. It can also address the polarization and lack of trust that erode civil discourse and decision making in a democratic society.

Why K–12 civic education matters

- Preparing students during the elementary and secondary school years for a life of active political participation is crucial for two main reasons.
 - Adolescence is a critical period of civic development. Voting is habitual, and preparing and encouraging students to vote as early as possible has long-term consequences (Green, Gerber & Shachar, 2003; Plutzer, 2002).
 - Providing high quality civic education before the college years helps to democratize access to essential knowledge and skills needed for future participation. Current gaps in voter turnout by college experience (Commission for Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013) and observed differences in the quality of civic education provided to young people of different backgrounds (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009) suggest that there is an opportunity gap with respect to access to high quality civic education.

K–12 civic education can positively affect students' civic knowledge, which boosts political and electoral engagement

- The taking of a civics course was associated with better civic knowledge and cognitive skills related to analysis of information (Gimpel & Lay, 2003; Milner, 2006; Niemi & Junn, 1998). It also boosts the likelihood of voter participation by 3 to 6 percentage points, and has a larger effect (7-11 points) for those who lack home-based political socialization (Bachner, 2010).
- High-quality civic education¹ in school is associated with higher levels of civic knowledge later in life (Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013), and with later electoral and political engagement (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013).
 - Having discussions about current issues in young adulthood was related to greater electoral engagement. Being taught about voting and being encouraged to vote by a high school teacher predicted political knowledge in early adulthood (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013).
- Civic knowledge, in turn, predicts political participation, voter turnout, and informed voting, even after controlling for formal educational attainment, social class, and other demographic

indicators (e.g., Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Verba, Sholzman, & Brady, 1995).

- School-based civic education also promotes positive civic dispositions and skills.
 - Experiencing service-learning in high school predicted civic engagement, if the service-learning involved discussion of root causes of the problem underlying the service experience (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013).
 - More extracurricular participation in high school was associated with higher political knowledge today (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013).
 - Civic curriculum and civics skills are associated with one another (Comber, 2005).
 - Students who take courses that include discussions of controversial political issues showed an increased interest in politics, followed the news more, and reported a willingness to listen to people who disagreed with them (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Our classrooms can and should be political in order to build skills to deliberate political questions

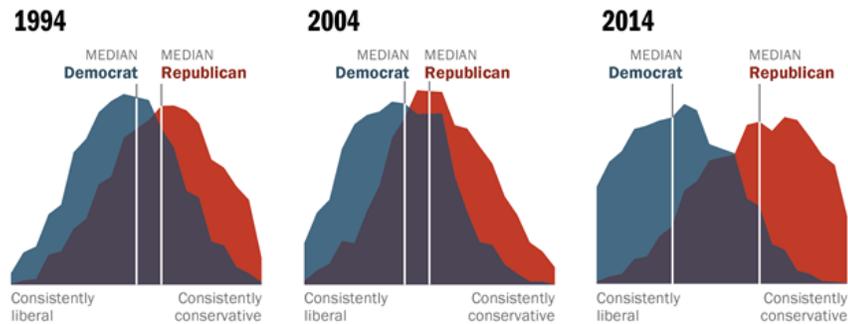
- Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2015) argue that democratic education should occur in a “political classroom,” which is defined as a classroom climate and learning activities that help students develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that “allow them to collectively make decisions about how we ought to live together” (p. 11).
- Informed citizenry is an important component of a democratic society. It is imperative that teachers help students develop an ability to talk across political and ideological differences by teaching students to weigh evidence, consider competing views, form an opinion, articulate that opinion, and respond to those who disagree.

Why it is important for students to encounter political views different from their own

- Americans have become increasingly polarized along partisan divides and there are now fewer Americans who hold moderate views than two decades ago (Sunstein, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2014). In 2004, more than 50% of people in the United States lived in a county where one of the presidential candidates won by a landslide—compared to 26% in 1976 (Abramowitz, 2010).

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values



Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
 Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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- When moderate views become the minority opinion, those who hold moderate views are less likely to voice their

opinions (Mutz, 2006). This is true when examining a group of citizens or the U.S. Congress (Mann & Ornstein, 2012; McCarty et al., 2006).

Political polarization affects political participation with negative consequences

- Political polarization affects both who participates in political processes by voting and whether people can trust each other to work through challenges.
- Americans have been sorting themselves into communities of likeminded people for decades (Bishop, 2008), and live and work among people who are ideologically similar to themselves. Under such conditions, people come to hold more extreme views and become less tolerant of alternative viewpoints (Mutz, 2006; Sunstein, 2009).
- The “Big Sort” also affects students. U.S. schools are rapidly resegregating (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012) and classrooms reflect how diverse yet separated young people are today, based on their race, ethnicity, and social class. Just as there are red, blue, and purple communities, there are classrooms and schools with students whose views align with one another, or are more mixed. For example, Hess and McAvoy (2015) studied red, blue, and purple classrooms and found that students raised and schooled in more ideologically homogenous environments were beginning to hold more ideologically coherent views, were more partisan, and as young adults, they were far more likely to vote and remain interested in political affairs and political discussions.
- Mutz (2006) found that people who interact with people with diverse views are more tolerant of divergent opinions but are less likely to vote. Kawashima-Ginsberg and Levine (2014) found that young people who attended racially pluralistic high schools and were likely to be exposed to diverse views were less likely to vote and less likely to be civically engaged in all other ways, even after controlling for social class, educational progress, and race.
- Another consequence of polarization is that Americans no longer trust one another. A dwindling majority (57%) of Americans say they have a good deal of confidence “in the wisdom of the fellow American people when it comes to making political decisions” (Pew Research Center, 2014). The loss of trust among citizens poses a threat to democratic life because citizens must rely on strangers to make decisions that affect the common good (Allen, 2004). Polarization feeds distrust, and distrust causes further polarization (McCarty et al., 2006).
- Political polarization causes many adult Americans to believe that many teachers are trying to influence students’ political views in ways that are inappropriate, even though there is scant evidence that this actually occurs (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Regardless, the belief or fear that it may be taking place makes it more difficult and more risky for teachers to engage students in high quality civic education that must contain the discussion of controversial political issues if it is to be effective.

Endnotes

¹High-quality civic education includes instruction in civics and government, history, economics, geography, law, and democracy; the discussion of current events and controversial political issues; service learning, school governance, and extracurricular activities that provide young people opportunities get involved in their schools and communities; and curricular and co-curricular simulations of democratic processes.

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